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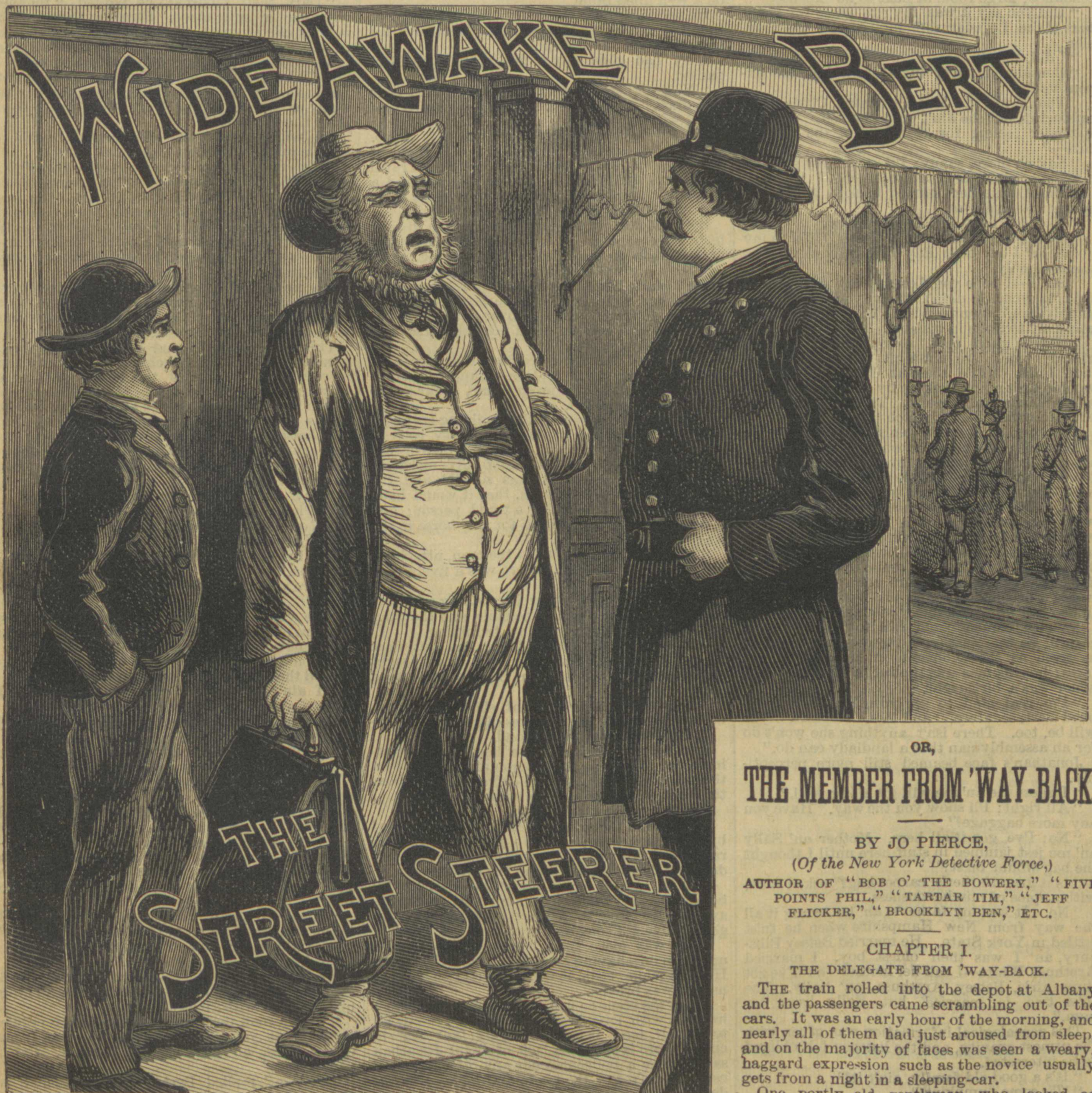
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OR,
THE MEMBER FROM 'WAY-BACK.

BY JO PIERCE,
(Of the New York Detective Force.)
AUTHOR OF "BOB O' THE BOWERY," "FIVE
POINTS PHIL," "TARTAR TIM," "JEFF
FLICKER," "BROOKLYN BEN," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE DELEGATE FROM 'WAY-BACK.

THE train rolled into the depot at Albany and the passengers came scrambling out of the cars. It was an early hour of the morning, and nearly all of them had just aroused from sleep, and on the majority of faces was seen a weary, haggard expression such as the novice usually gets from a night in a sleeping-car.

One portly old gentleman who looked as though he might have been asleep for fifty years, so old-fashioned was his general appear-

"I AM A MAN THAT MAKES SECH COMMON PUBLIC SERVANTS AS YOU. I AM THE ASSEMBLY-MAN FROM GREEN HILLS, AN' THAT BOY CAN PROVE IT. CAN'T YOU, SONNY?"

ance, toiled down the steps of the car with a carpet-bag firmly grasped in one hand.

A boy at once shot to his side.

"Here we are, sir!" he cried, briskly. "It's too early for a decent meal in any hotel or restaurant, but Mrs. Cleopatra Clyde makes a specialty of early breakfasts. Her bill of fare is beyond complaint. Prime sirloin steaks; fresh rolls; real country butter; coffee that will build the system right up; and all the delicacies of the season. Cost you only fifteen cents; you'll have to pay one dollar at a hotel. Come and give us a trial—all home comforts. Mrs. Cleopatra Clyde, North Pearl street, proprietress. Special rates to members of the Legislature. I'm Mrs. Clyde's deputy. My name is Wide-Awake Bert, and I represent a first-class house. Take your grip, sir?"

All this had been said with startling rapidity—at least, it startled the unsophisticated old gentleman to whom it was addressed. He had come to a full stop, holding his carpet-bag firmly, and was staring at the boy in confusion.

"What did you say?" he asked, blankly.

"The best establishment in Albany. All home comforts at phenomenally low prices. Food that cheers, but does not inebriate; real country feather beds, if desired; prompt attendance; large room at next to no expense—"

"Did you say it was fav'rite place fur members o' the Legislature?" interrupted the traveler.

"I did, that."

"Considered pooty high-toned, but not expensive?"

"That's jest it. Mrs. Cleopatra Clyde is an aristocrat, but she ain't proud herself. She has a tender feeling for members of the Legislature—"

"Say no more, sonny; I'll go an' try it. I'm a member o' the Legislature myself!"

Wide Awake Bert started back in well-feigned surprise and awe.

"You don't say so!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, I be. The town o' Green Hills is my home, an' I hev been duly an' legally elected ter the Assembly."

"Sir, I—I hope you'll excuse my speaking so bold to you. I didn't know you were an assemblyman," stammered the boy, though there was a sly twinkle in his eyes.

"Never mind that, sonny; don't you be afeerd o' me. I'm not a bit better than common folks. I told them at Green Hills that I wouldn't git a bit stuck up by bein' sent here as a law-maker, an' I won't. That ain't the way with Jonathan Berry, which is me."

The speaker beamed genially upon Bert, his face looking like a full moon with fleecy clouds around it. He was a broad-shouldered six-footer, and his huge hands were bronzed, hardened, and bruised from a season's labor upon a farm. His round, red face was clean-shaven, with the exception of a short, bushy line of whiskers under his chin, which reached from ear to ear. His clothes, which were coarse, and in defiance of style, put all shape to defiance, and did not fit him any more than a "meal-bag would a broomstick," and his feet were incased in boots of unmistakable "cowhide."

No city person could fail to read him at a glance; he was just from the country, and was as fresh as the cabbages on his own hillside farm; but his face was that of a man to whom honor was a birthright.

"I'm real glad to see you, Mr. Berry," replied Bert, sedately, "and Mrs. Cleopatra Clyde will be, too. There isn't anything she won't do for an assemblyman that a landlady can do."

Jonathan's face beamed still more perceptibly.

"I guess she an' me will git along well."

"All right; I'll show you the way. Have you any more baggage?"

"No; I've got it all here. Mother an' Sally an' me jest jammed in stuff here until I thought the bag would bust!"

"Is it grandfather's carpet-bag?" asked Bert, with a spice of mischievousness.

"No. It was my father's, an' he brung it all the way from New Hampshire when he fust settled in York State. He married Betsey Pillsbury, an' I was their oldest boy. I married Arethusa White—I call her mother—an' I've got three girls, Betsey, Arethusa, an' Sally. The fust two is married, but Sally lives 'ter hum."

This genealogical information was given with the utmost gravity, and the listener felt obliged to be interested.

"It's a good old family, ain't it?"

"Tis some pumpkins!"

"Mrs. Cleopatra Clyde will be glad to hear about it."

"Will she? Wal, now, I guess she's a mighty clever woman. We'll go there right away. What did you say your name was?"

"Wide-Awake Bert, the Street Steerer, sometimes called Break-o'-Day Bert, the Wide-Awake Runner."

"Land sakes! I never he'rn o' sech a name."

"It's all right when you see through it. In every-day life I am Herbert Barclay, but I got my nickname by steering folks around, and being wide awake about it. Since I became a runner for Mrs. Clyde, I am up and out at the break of day to get customers for her—so she calls me Break-o'-Day Bert."

"It ain't so very bad a name, an' it applies better than one name up at Green Hills. One o' my neighbors is Elnathan Drinkwater, but he's the consarnedest critter ter drink *whisky* you ever he'rn of. Pesky little water he drinks, name or no name."

"That's bad; but come on—let's get away to the boarding-house."

Mr. Berry continued to stand and hold his carpet-bag, but it had begun to dawn upon him that it was pulling down heavily on his empty stomach. The charms of Mrs. Cleopatra Clyde's boarding-house arose, picture-like, in the worthy assemblyman's mind, and he longed to look upon a well filled table.

He declined to let Bert carry his baggage, but followed readily as Mrs. Clydes' "runner" led the way from the station.

They had gone only a few steps when Bert paused.

"You ought to have a paper to read with your breakfast," he observed. "Wait here a second and I will get one."

He hurried away, and Berry was left alone.

He found himself at the head of a flight of steps which led to the street below. Travel there was limited to a few early teams and a still fewer number of persons who were on their way to the West Shore station, just beyond.

Berry looked up the street and saw a distant team approaching. Just then it had the street pretty much to itself, none other being near, and the old gentleman looked at it absently as it came toward him. It was a light Express wagon, and had some load, but the latter was small and the top was covered over with a cloth. What the load was he could not have told had he looked ever so sharply.

The nose of the horse reached the corner of an intersecting street, and then happened something not down on the programme, so far as the driver was concerned.

Out from the cover of the building sprang a man fantastically clothed in a hairy robe of some sort, with a mask over his face of the horrible sort used by Fourth-of-July masqueraders. The whole outfit was so wild, and the man looked so unlike a man, that it would have been a startling sight for a timid person; and it proved a startling sight for the horse in the wagon.

Straight forward bounded the man, uttering a yell as he went, and then there was a lively rush of events.

The horse wheeled sharply, making a frantic effort to escape as soon as possible, and the wagon turned over on its side in a twinkling.

Out went the driver, headlong, and out went the previously-mentioned load. A strange sight was revealed to Jonathan Berry's astonished gaze.

Along the pavement went shooting a long, narrow box, and Berry's eyes dilated.

"A coffin!" he gasped, aloud.

Another moment and the horse was clattering away, dragging the wagon after it, but on the pavement were left the driver and the box, the former appearing to be stunned.

The box was not very long.

The man in the grotesque make-up was joined by a second man; the two ran forward and raised the box; they threw it upon their shoulders and disappeared around the corner.

"Land sakes!" cried Jonathan Berry, "I'll be consarned ef them chaps ain't body-snatchers, an' they've stole a coffin, corpse an' all. By gosh! I've got somethin' ter say about that!"

There was more than honest indignation to urge him on—having been duly elected by Green Hills to make laws, it was his duty to see that no law was broken.

Down the steps he ran, and then up the street he went with long steps. He had the rescue all to himself, too. It is an annoying fact that in crises there is always a lack of help; Jonathan saw neither a policeman nor any other man except the driver of the team, and he lay like one dead.

It was not far to the corner, and the Green Hills delegate turned the building with the fixed

determination to cause an earthquake around the despicable body-snatchers.

He bade fair to begin his career at Albany with an exploit which would make the State Capitol and Green Hills alike ring with his name and fame.

His hopes fell when he turned the corner, however; a second team was rattling down through the street, and while one man hurried up the horse, the other was covering the oblong box from view.

This did not look promising, but Berry was not to be beaten so easy; he pursued with all possible speed. Two things were against him. First, a man of his years was no match for a horse in a race; secondly, he forgot to drop his carpet-bag, and toiled along under a load which would have beaten the best runner in the land.

The team gained at every step, and in a short time it had turned another corner and utterly distanced the eminent law-maker from Green Hills.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNEXPLAINED PUZZLE.

MR. BERRY paused, and, leaning against a lamp-post, breathed like a locomotive.

"Darn their pictur's!" he panted, "they've got away in spite o' me. Strange there wa'n't nobody else around! The first bill I introduce in the Assembly will be ter have one-half the folks in this lazy town git up before breakfast—no; I'll hev a policeman app'nted. They ought ter have one, by gosh! Why, they must hev as many as five or six in York City, for I seen them there, myself!"

He wiped away the perspiration with a handkerchief as ancient-looking as himself.

"This must be a pesky wicked city when folks go 'round stealin' coffins out of a hearse—Say, great land! I'll bet somebody has stole my carpet-bag! I left it in the road when I started ter chase them—Why, no I didn't, either. Here I've got it right in my hand, now! Wal, I vum! it's no wonder I couldn't cutrun them body-snatchers."

He looked affectionately at the carpet-bag, glad that it had not got away, too; and then suddenly remembered that the driver of the first wagon had been left senseless in the street.

This was enough to send him hurrying back, anxious to render what help he could, but when he reached the scene of the late incident the driver was not to be seen. Of all the objects which had taken part in the affair, men, horses, teams and coffin, not a fragment remained to tell that anything unusual had occurred.

Berry had just discovered this when a policeman approached. Berry's face brightened and he accosted him.

"Say, you b'long ter the band, don't you?"

"What's that?" curtly asked the officer.

"You b'long ter the band, don't ye?"

"What band?"

"Why, the village band. You've got a uniform on."

"Are you drunk or crazy? I am a policeman."

"Be you? Wal, land sakes! then of course you are an honest man. Say, did you see a man git up out o' the road an' go off?"

"Come, now, what are you giving us?" inquired the officer, somewhat aggressively.

"I ain't offered ter give you anything. I s'posed you policemen got paid by the village."

At this moment Wide-Awake Bert appeared on the scene.

"Hallo!" he cried, addressing the member from Green Hills, "where've you been?"

"In the insane asylum, I guess," tartly observed the policeman.

"Say, did you see the coffin?" eagerly asked Mr. Berry, addressing Bert.

"Let's have a new deal," suggested the officer. "I know you, Bert, and it seems you know this old party. What is he? Is he the first madman ever in an asylum, come back to life?"

"Mister," quoth Jonathan, severely, "I'll thank you ter show more respect in speakin' o' me. Did you say you was a policeman?"

"I did that."

Mr. Berry thrust the thumb of his free hand into the armhole of his vest and, straightening up, observed with great dignity:

"I am a man that makes sech common public servants as you. I am the assemblyman from Green Hills, an' that boy can prove it. Can't you, sonny?"

"Officer," replied Bert, "this gentleman is right. He is a member of the Legislature."

"I don't care if he's two members!" was the retort of the irate guardian of the peace. "He

can't get 'loaded' and kick up a row on my beat!"

"Loaded!" echoed Mr. Berry. "Who's carryin' this carpet-bag, anyhow? Your arms may be weak; but it's no great load for me!"

"In plain English, 'loaded' means drunk!" shouted the policeman.

"What's that? Me drunk? Why, man, I'm a teetotaler! You look on the pledge at Green Hills an'— Great land! did you say I was drunk, an' me a member o' the Assembly?"

Down went the carpet-bag at last.

"By gosh! I'll show ye!" he added, getting red in the face. "I didn't come ter this village ter be insulted, an' I'll put ye on your back in the road. I will, I vum!"

He paused to push back his sleeves, and Bert seized the chance to whisper in his ear:

"Don't do it, mister! It would hurt your standing at Mrs. Cleopatra Clyde's, if it was known you had a fight with a common policeman."

The belligerent hands went down.

"All right, all right! I'll mind what you say, an' there shan't be any trouble."

"No, for I'm going to run you in," snapped the officer.

"No, you ain't, mister! I've had one race already this mornin', an' that's enough. I won't run you, though I was pooty spry in my younger days; but we'll call it a draw. How's that?"

"Do you want to pull my leg?"

"Pull your leg! Land sakes, no! Why in the world should I want ter do that? Mebbe, though, you've got a cramp, an' ef I can help you anyway, I'll yank away at your leg like sixty."

"Now, gentlemen, see here!" interrupted the Street Steerer, "you need me for an interpreter; you can't understand each other. Mr. Berry, the officer thought you were afraid of arrest and want to pay him to let you off. In the language of slang, if he got any money out of you, he would 'pull your leg' for whatever sum you gave him. He spoke with sarcasm when he asked if you wanted to pull his leg. See?"

"I'll be consarned ef I do; but, never mind. Officer, they've got the coffin an' gone down the road like all creation!"

"Wide-Awake," said the policeman, in a despairing tone, "I reckon you will have to chip in before we get light. If this hayseed really knows what he's talking about, I wish you would find out."

"Mr. Berry, what has happened since I left you?"

Bert's plain question put the assemblyman on his feet again, and he told his story in a very brief, direct way. He declared that a coffin had been tipped out of a wagon into the "road," and then carried off by other parties.

"But what mystifies me," he added, "is what has become o' the driver o' the hearse. When he got over bein' senseless, why did he run away without gettin' the coffin back? That beats me!"

"Was it a hearse?"

"I s'pose it was the kind you use here, but I call it a reg'lar Express wagon. There! there's one like it, now."

He pointed to a passing team.

"Nobody carts coffins around the streets in a wagon like that!" sharply observed the officer. "You've been deceived, old man; the long box was no coffin."

"Then what was it?"

"Give it up."

"Consarn it! I know 'twas a coffin!"

"So do I!"

The words sounded above them, and they glanced up to see a woman looking out of a window.

"I saw them go by here," she added, "and I'll swear that the long box was a coffin. I could see it very plainly. Besides this, when they went by I heard one man say to the other: 'Cover up the coffin!' and then the second man did cover it up."

"Did you know these men?"

"No."

"Where did the driver of the first wagon go?"

"I didn't see him at all. What I saw was the other team go through here, and then the old man chased them. I know the long box was a coffin!"

Her positive assertion left the policeman no choice as to his course of conduct.

"I will report the case at once," he declared.

"I want your names as witnesses."

"Sartain, sartain!" the old gentleman agreed.

"I am Jonathan Berry, an' I'm come ter Albany as the assemblyman from Green Hills. I represent that place in the Legislature, an' ef

you want ter talk this affair over at any time, you'll find me either at the Capitol or Mrs. Cleo Clydeopatra's boardin'-house."

"Cleopatra Clyde," the Street Steerer amended.

"Jes' so—'zactly."

The rest of the work was soon done, and Bert and the old gentleman walked on toward North Pearl street.

"Say, sonny," Berry suddenly broke out, "I s'pose this affair will be printed in all the papers, eh?"

"Probably."

"Land alive! don't I wish I'd run down that air team! I would done it, too, only fur this carpet-bag. It is pesky queer I didn't think ter drop it."

"The case was exciting, sir."

"I was some stirred up. By gosh! I'll write hum ter mother an' Sally, an' tell them all about it, afore I'm a day older!"

The good man's face beamed in anticipation of the awe and delight which his "women folks" would feel when they knew of his exploit, and he had a suspicion that his prompt entrance to public affairs would lead to his having new political honors thrust upon him. He confided these ideas to the boy, and added:

"Anyhow, it will help me ter git through my bill ter improve Green Hills Common. I want the State ter take up that matter an' bear the expense, an' they ought ter do it. We want an iron fence 'round the Common, an' we want it made bigger. As 'tis now the road runs past Amasa Tuttle's an' Levi Pratt's, but I say Amasa an' Levi ought ter be bought out, an' their houses tore down, an' the land added ter the common. The money would come in handy ter them, too, fur Amasa's son Elijah married Levi's da'rter, Matilda, last April; an' now Elijah has fell an' broke his leg, an' both families is peskily put to it ter git along fur money."

Wide-Awake Bert listened gravely to this account, and realized that he was in a fair way to get the whole history of Green Hills, if Jonathan remained long at Mrs. Clyde's boarding-houses.

He expressed approval of the contemplated bill, and declared that the State certainly ought to lend Green Hills a helping hand, and put the Common in good condition: whereat Jonathan's face beamed anew, and he generously gave his young guide five cents "ter go an' have a good time with."

The boarding-house was soon reached.

Mrs. Clyde had come to the conclusion that her Break-o'-Day Runner had not succeeded in capturing any game, but the appearance of the eminent assemblyman quite changed her opinion.

Nature had done well by Mrs. Clyde. She was not beautiful, but there was a good deal of her—two hundred pounds and a fraction. Dignity was hers by birthright, and it had never got away from her; yet she was not a cold, unfeeling woman. If her massive appearance aroused awe, her amiable cordiality awakened admiration—at least, so Mr. Berry found it.

Mrs. Clyde was glad to see Mr. Berry, and she said so; and in a short time he was enjoying breakfast and telling the story of his adventure.

He was not quite certain whether this would make him a celebrity in Albany—it was sure to do so at Green Hills—but the way Mrs. Clyde received the account encouraged him greatly.

"It was heroic of you to pursue them!" she declared.

The eminent law-maker blushed.

"Do ye really think so, marm?"

"Indeed, I do."

"I had a sacred duty ter perform."

"Tisn't every one will let duty send him into danger."

"Marm, I am a member of the Assembly!" solemnly reminded Mr. Berry.

"All assemblymen are not like you."

"Land sakes! I hope they ain't cowards."

"I am afraid some are."

"I'm sorry ter hear it. As fur me, I never let danger stop me. Why, in the heat o' the campaign my political opponent called me some pooty hard names, an' it took four men to hold me back from thrashing him!"

Mr. Berry held his knife and fork suspended in the air and looked anxiously over his spectacles.

Mrs. Clyde held up both hands in amazement.

"Is it possible!" she cried.

"True as preachin', marm. Then, only a month ago, when I found a steer hookin' up Widder Smith's garden sass, I ketched him right by the horns an' we had a most 'tarnal time. I downed him, though. I knowed he was cross afore I took bolt, an' that I run a good 'eal o' resk, but I couldn't see the widder's garden sass

destroyed. I have a feller feelin'—a deep admiration—fur widders!"

"Dear me!—and I am a widow!" murmured Mrs. Cleopatra.

Mr. Berry blushed redly.

"It's a burnin' disgrace ter the men of Albany!" he declared.

"You would not say that if you were one of them."

"By gosh! I would show ye, marm! Why, Mrs. Clydeopatra, as 'tis now, ef I wa'n't a married man—"

Jonathan was speaking with tumultuous haste, but a vision of his home at Green Hills suddenly arose before him. In imagination he saw "mother and Sally," and he stopped short, swallowed a mouthful of food the wrong way, and nearly strangled before he could recover from it.

CHAPTER III.

RECOGNIZED TOO LATE.

MRS. CLYDE assured Jonathan of her sympathy, and he assured her that he was grateful for it, but the near approach to strangulation had helped him out of a difficulty, and he did not venture into it again.

There was such a thing as prudence, and he concluded to admire the fascinating widow at a distance. Not to make the distance too great, he asked after breakfast, to see the vacant rooms, and in a short time he was duly installed as one of the regular boarders.

Wide-Awake Bert had gone away, so Jonathan strolled out on the street to see the sights. His career as a law-maker would not begin until the following week, and as the Street Steerer had promised to show him the Capitol later in the day, he strolled down North Pearl street.

Albany was fairly awake, and Jonathan would have found the scene of activity very enjoyable only for one thing—he continually found other people in his way, and in his efforts to avoid them, a collision usually followed.

This, however, he ascribed to their awkwardness, and felt them no ill-will.

He wandered as far as State street, and then turned and retraced his steps.

He was meandering quietly along, when he came upon two men who were having an animated argument upon some point: an argument which seemed to be a good deal tinged with ill-feeling. One of the pair accosted Jonathan as he was passing.

"Excuse me, sir, but will you give me your attention for a moment? We want a citizen of good repute to settle a point."

"One of judgment, too," added the second man.

"Do you doubt that this gentleman is that?"

"Most decidedly not. His appearance is a sufficient guarantee both of his judgment and character."

"Enough said; we will leave it to him."

"No better judge can be found."

Thus far the men had talked so fast that Jonathan had seen no chance to say a word; but their remarks had been heard, and they fell gratefully upon Mr. Berry's ears.

A capable citizen was wanted to settle a dispute, and he had been selected because his personal appearance showed him to fill all demands.

"Wal, boys, I don't mind givin' ye a lift," he agreed, smiling benignly.

"Very well; step into this recess where we shall be free from the crowd."

The place indicated was a deep doorway, and when once there the men allowed Jonathan to stand at the rear, while they stood in front of him, hiding him from the view of any one who was passing on the sidewalk.

The first speaker took from his pocket what seemed to be a gold watch and chain.

"Here," he said, "is something my friend and I won at a church fair. We bought a ticket together, and it drew this watch and chain, which cost the church folks just one hundred dollars. Now, my friend would like the watch, while I don't want it, and I have agreed to sell my half to him."

"But not for half the money!" interrupted the second man, quickly.

"That is where we differ," added the first speaker. "I maintain that as the watch cost one hundred dollars, and I own one-half of it, I should have just fifty dollars for my share."

"And I insist," chimed in Number Two, "that as the ticket which brought the watch to us cost only one dollar, all told, this fact should be taken into consideration, and that it would be unjust for me to pay fifty dollars. What! fifty dollars for fifty cents' worth? Why, think of the enormous profit to my friend!"

"Yes, but bear in mind that *you* make the same profit on the *other* half, even though you keep the watch."

"Do I have fifty dollars to put in my pocket?"

"No, but you have the watch to put there, and one half of it cost you nothing."

"Gentlemen," interrupted Jonathan, with dignity, "listen to me. This is a plain case—"

"We leave it wholly to you."

"That's it."

"And," asked Mr. Berry, "will you abide by my decision?"

Both men declared that they would.

"Then I kin settle it mighty quick. There is only one right way. It don't matter what the watch cost ye; it's what it's w'u'th that you must consider; an' it's vally is a hund'ud dollars. But it cost ye one dollar ter git it, so it only stan's ye at ninety-nine dollars. Thar'fore, it is right an' proper that *you* should pay *him* forty-nine dollars an' fifty cents."

Mr. Berry drew himself up a whole inch higher, feeling that he had made a decision worthy of a member of the Assembly, but the face of the would-be purchaser fell.

"That's dead against me," he remonstrated.

"Yes, but don't you hev fifty dollars' worth o' gold watch that only cost ye fifty cents? Ain't that fair profit?"

"By Jove! I guess your right!"

The speaker hesitated a moment, and then thrust his hand deep into his pocket and brought out a green-backed strip of paper on which were the figures "100."

"Take it out of this bank-note," he added.

"Can't change it," replied his friend, shaking his head. "Perhaps, however, our gentlemanly referee can."

He looked at Jonathan as he spoke.

"Wish I could," answered the member from Green Hills, "but I ain't got so much money in my pants, myself. Though," he added, anxious not to be thought poverty-stricken, "I hev a check which Ambrose Pease sent down ter hev cashed."

"For what amount?"

"Jes' one hundred dollars."

"What bank is it on?"

Jonathan named the institution.

"That is near here. It's not banking hours now, gentlemen, as you are both aware, of course; but the cashier is a friend of mine, and will oblige me. Here, sir, if you will hold this—" handing the bank-note to Jonathan—"I will get the check cashed and return in a moment. As I know the cashier I shall not have to be identified, as a stranger would."

"Sartainly not," Mr. Berry agreed. "Run right along an' git it done. I shall be obleeged to ye; an' your friend kin watch me ter see that I don't run away with the bill!"

Believing that he had made a capital joke, Jonathan looked over his spectacles and smiled broadly, and the peculiar humor of the affair so appealed to the strangers that they too laughed heartily.

"Capital joke!" said Number One.

"That's true, but we know that a hundred dollars would not tempt a man of your standing," remarked Number Two.

"Wal, you're about right, young man."

"I'm off," continued Number One; "I'll return just as soon as I can get the check cashed."

He started to pass out, but at that moment another figure appeared in his path. It was only a boy, but his face bore a determined look, and Mr. Berry at once recognized Break-o'-Day Bert.

"I don't believe," declared the boy, in a sharp voice, "that this gentleman wants you to cash his check!"

The stranger laid one hand roughly on Bert's arm.

"Get out of the way!" he exclaimed, angrily, "or I'll—"

"No, you won't! You try to break through and I'll call a policeman!"

The Street Steerer's eyes flashed, and he stood firmly in the way.

"What've you got to do about it?"

"This man is my friend. Mr. Berry, don't you let him take your check, nor have any dealing with him. Take the check, and give him that bogus hundred-dollar bill!"

"Bogus!" gasped Jonathan.

"You little liar!" snarled the man, "how dare you say that? The money is all right—"

"Had you dare go with Mr. Berry to the bank and have the cashier look at it?"

"The bank isn't open."

"Yes, it is; and has been for an hour. Mr. Berry, hang on to your check! Why should this man take it to the bank to get it cashed? Wouldn't it be just as easy for him to get his

precious hundred-dollar bill broke there?—if the bill is any good."

The strangers exchanged glances.

"Hang it all!" cried one, "I'm not here to be insulted. Come, Percy! If this old gent will let a street tramp wheedle him, we don't want any of his advice. Let's go!"

The check and the alleged bank-note had been passed back to their respective owners, and when the men made another start for the street there was no opposition. Wide-Awake Bert looked doubtful, but allowed them to go.

"Good land! what does all this mean?" gasped poor Mr. Berry.

"Those were confidence men."

"What kind o' men?"

"Confidence."

"I don't jestly understand."

"Swindlers, sharpers, cheats."

"You don't say so!"

"Yes; it was all a put-up job to swindle you. That hundred-dollar bill was counterfeit."

"My gracious! how could you tell?"

"Oh! it's an old dodge. That fellow would not have come back if he had got the money on your note. He would have skipped out."

"But his friend was goin' ter stay with me."

"For about five minutes; then *he* would have gone with the plausible excuse that he would hurry his accomplice back with the money; but you would not have seen either again."

"Who in time told you this?" demanded Jonathan, utterly dumfounded.

"Nobody; it is a game played every day on strangers."

The truth dawned upon the old gentleman at last, and his broad face flushed.

"I was almost took in, an' me a member o' the Assembly!" he groaned.

"Twas a close call."

"Why, I wouldn't 'a' lost that money fur the best farm at Green Hills!"

"If you had let him take the check away it would have disappeared as completely as the coffin did."

Jonathan started, and then grasped the boy's arm.

"What's that you said?"

The Street Steerer repeated his assertion.

"Great land!" the assemblyman cried, "I do b'lieve them was the fellers that stole the coffin!"

"The two just gone?"

"Yes."

"It don't seem likely."

"Their faces was familiar the minute I seen them, an' I kep' tryin' ter think where I'd seen 'em afore. I was goin' ter ask them where we'd met previous, but I don't need to now. Them was the same men who stole the coffin, put it in the wagon an' run away with it!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes—dead sart'in!"

"Then let's get after them quick as a flash. We'll have them arrested, and I guess it will be big game. There is a mystery about that coffin business that puzzles me."

By that time they were on the sidewalk, but it took only one glance for Wide-Awake to see that the work before him was not easy. North Pearl street was crowded, and the sharpers were nowhere in sight. They had been allowed some time, and if they had not improved it to good advantage, they were by no means as sharp as the Street Steerer believed them.

They must act on the forlorn hope, however.

"You go one way, and I'll go the other," he directed. "If you see them, call a policeman."

"By Cain! I guess I'm perleeceman enough fur them ef I git my eyes on 'em!" declared Jonathan, hoarse with indignation. "Ef I see the pesky scoundrels, I'll show them what sort o' muscle they raise up Green Hills way—I'll break 'em right in two!"

CHAPTER IV.

GETTING DEEPER INTO THE MYSTERY.

THE delegate from Green Hills used emphatic language, but he was angry. It amazed him to think that any man should have the audacity to try to take in a member of the Assembly, and the fact that such men had been found, and had made a success of the attempt as far as he went, was the straw that broke his back and his pride.

He skurried away down the street and succeeded in running into several inoffensive citizens with full force, thereby arousing a good deal of anger and a strong suspicion that he was an escaped lunatic, but all his efforts to find the confidence men proved a failure.

Fortunately for honest pedestrians he remembered well enough how his new acquaintances

looked not to make any mistake of identity, and no great harm was done.

He finally reached State street, and there abandoned the struggle.

"I vum! the 'tarnal critters hev got away!" he disconsolately muttered, as he paused and mopped the perspiration from his forehead. "Tain't no kind o' use goin' any further, an' I don't b'lieve they come this way, anyhow. Like as not that boy has got 'em, an' I'll go back an' help him march them ter jail. I'll hev a bill in the Assembly ter hit their case afore I'm a week older. I will, by gracious!"

Meditating on his purposed vengeance he retraced his steps, but when he met Bert, the latter was as empty-handed as himself.

The sharpers had made good their escape.

"We'll have 'em yit!" Jonathan declared.

"Where's the constable live?"

"We will go to the police-station at once."

"Which road is it on?"

"I'll show you the way. Come on!"

Bert led off, and they were soon at the station. When they arrived there was a delay. A policeman was making his report to the officer in charge, and, unknown to these officials, the whole was audible to the new-comers.

"You can depend upon it 'tis the same case," said the subordinate. "The end-board of the wagon got loose and slipped down, and the load shifted back. The man stopped near me, got out, shoved the box further in and refastened the end-board. I noticed the oblong shape of the box at the time."

"I wish you had spoken to the man."

"I had no idea anything was wrong until, getting sight of me after he started on, he whipped up his horse and went off like a frightened deer."

"You are sure he was frightened?"

"Yes. At the time I thought him some farmer with produce, and believed that he mistook me for a robber. I think otherwise, now; I think he was a criminal with a guilty secret."

"The woman who saw the box in the second team stated that the way the men handled the coffin indicated that it was heavy. What do you think?"

"I agree with her. My man put his shoulder against the box, in order to shove it back into his wagon, and seemed to use a good deal of strength."

"Then there was a burden in the coffin."

"Beyond doubt."

"The next question is, what was it?"

Jonathan Berry started eagerly forward.

"What in 'tarnation should it be but a dead body?" he demanded.

"Silence there!" commanded the officer in charge.

"Dead folks are always carried in coffins up my way," persisted Mr. Berry.

"Be still!" cautioned Bert, pulling at his sleeve.

"Throw out that man!" was the peremptory order.

"Beg pardon, captain, but he is our witness of whom I told you."

"Yes, an' I'm a member o' the Assembly, sent here to made laws which apply to *all* men!"

The first speaker was the policeman of the morning adventure, and his manner was very deferential to his superior; the second was Jonathan Berry, full of righteous indignation and lofty dignity.

"In that case," answered the captain, "I will overlook your interruption. I don't care what your position is, but you are wanted as a witness. I was about to send for you."

Jonathan had an idea that an apology was due him, but he was too eager to tell his story to wait for anything of the kind.

"I've seen the dead man sence!—I mean, them who took him away!" he declared.

"How's that?"

"I seen them on the road over yonder."

"Saw who?"

"The fellers who stole the coffin from the hearse."

Mr. Berry did not get along very rapidly with his explanation, and Bert came to the front. Using the fewest possible words he told of the attempt to swindle the assemblyman, adding that the latter was very sure the men were the same ones who had stolen the long box from the lone driver in the morning.

The captain grew freshly interested and called for personal descriptions. Jonathan gave a very clumsy one; Bert gave one that was brief and accurate. The captain shook his head.

"New birds in Albany, I'll bet!" he observed.

"Come up from New York to be here while the Legislature is in session," suggested a subordinate.

"They have begun well."

"And in a novel way."

The captain aroused.

"We have stumbled upon a crime, I verily believe," he continued. "Very early this morning a man was passing through the western part of the city with a wagon in which was an oblong box, apparently a coffin. When he got out to fix the end-board, and then resumed his way, the sight of a policeman frightened him so that he whipped his horse into a run."

"With his face east."

"Exactly. A sufficient time elapsed, let me say, for him to get to the Central Railroad station. He was nearing it when two men frightened his horse; he was tipped out and left unconscious; the man seized the oblong box, placed it in *their* wagon, and drove rapidly away. This is the story, if we assume that the man seen by Purdy was the same robbed later."

"He probably was."

"Assuming that the oblong box was a coffin, we are left to believe, from the fact that it was heavy, that there was *some* kind of a load in it. We may safely infer that it was a coffin, for our female witness declares that she saw it plainly. All this points to a crime as radical as it is mysterious."

"Body-snatchers!" tersely observed a policeman. "Some students have a new 'subject.'"

"Several notables were buried last week. Is it not more likely that there will be a body held for ransom? According to the theories which engage us now, some of the criminals are strangers in Albany. They would hardly be the parties selected to get medical subjects."

"It is mighty odd!"

"We have some clues to work upon. First, the two men have been well described by the boy yonder. Second, the horse of the first man ran away after the turn-over. That horse must bring up somewhere; perhaps it is even now in the hands of the police."

"There is no description out as to the driver of the first vehicle."

"None. That man, too, was a rascal, or, when he recovered his senses, he would have made a strong effort to recover his freight instead of running away. Evidently he went at headlong speed; therefore, we may infer that he was in guilty business, and feared detection."

Jonathan Berry turned to Bert and spoke in a loud whisper:

"He ain't in a trance, is he?"

"Who?"

"The head constable."

"The captain? No; he isn't in a trance. Why did you think he was?"

"I seen a feller at Green Hills once who went inter a trance, an' then told all sorts o' things. How does this chap know all this without bein' in a trance?"

"Oh! that's a part of his business. He's shrewd, you see."

"He seems ter be a most 'tarnal critter!"

The speakers were called forward to the desk, and when again questioned regarding their names, Bert laid a card before the captain. The latter read as follows:

"WIDE-AWAKE BERT, THE STREET STEERER."

All orders executed with care and dispatch.

"What's all this?" asked the official.

"The plain English of it is that I am an errand-boy—a Street Steerer—but 'Business Runner' sounds a little more high-toned, and the cost of printing is about the same."

The captain smiled, finished up his business with them, and told them they could go, but Jonathan had a new idea in his head. Once outside, he spoke eagerly:

"Say, is it the fashion 'round here ter hev them bits o' pasteboard printed?"

"Yes."

"How much does it cost?"

"Thirty-five will pay for a big pack."

"I vum! I'll hev some on 'em! I ain't goin' ter git left on style; it would be a burnin' disgrace to a member o' the Legislature. What'd I ought ter have printed on 'em?"

"Oh! I don't know. Your name—"

"Yes, yes!" was the eager rejoinder. "Say I make it 'J. Berry, Member o' the Assembly an' Legally-Elected Law-Maker. At Mrs. Clyde's boarding-house an' the Capitol.' Ha! how does that sound ter *you*?"

Jonathan turned a beaming, triumphant face toward his young friend.

"That will do, sir, but why not talk it over with Mrs. Clyde? She might help you."

"I b'lieve she can, an' I'll do it. That woman is a perfect marvel o' wisdom an'—an' good looks."

"That's a fact, Mr. Berry."

"I like ter talk ter her."

"No doubt."

"Say, my lad," continued Jonathan, taking the boy's arm and looking around cautiously, "when other assemblymen come here, do they talk with the—*the ladies*?"

"Why, certainly; it would be thought impolite not to do so."

"Would it? Would it, *really*? Gosh all hemlocks! I'll talk with Mrs. Clyde every chance I git. I s'pose mother an' Sally would raise Cain ef they heerd on't, but I don't see no 'arthly way fur them ter know it unless I tell on't, an' I guess I ain't got so weak-headed yit."

"I don't think you'll go so far as to elope."

"Elope?" echoed Mr. Berry, his face lengthening. "Why, I wouldn't leave mother an' Sally fur all the rest o' the world lumped together; but I think I ought ter talk with Mrs. Clyde, and not seem proud and stuck up!"

Wide-Awake had by this time estimated Jonathan's simple, honest nature well, and he was very much amused to see the view he took of matters. He felt that Mr. Berry could be left to talk with Mrs. Clyde without danger to "mother and Sally" that their husband and father would be lost to them.

When the boarding-house was reached Mr. Berry entered like a hero. It had been his delight at Green Hills to retail the news, and the episode of the coffin struck him as being news of the blood-curdling order.

He divulged the new chapter in the case to Mrs. Clyde with great spirit. Standing in the middle of the room he waved his arms and declaimed as though he was already in his seat at the Capitol, and he found a good listener in Mrs. Clyde.

She declared that she was shocked; that the iniquity of *some* men was surprising; and that this particular mystery fairly made her flesh creep.

Jonathan was delighted, and when he had thrilled her all he could, he hurried to his room to report the mystery to "mother and Sally" through the medium of pen and ink.

CHAPTER V.

WIDE-AWAKE OVERHEARS A NARRATIVE.

THE day was at an end. All the afternoon Bert had been occupied in showing Mr. Berry around, and the latter had seen a good many wonderful things, and left his order for some printed cards, upon which his name and office would stand out boldly.

By evening he was well satisfied to remain indoors. Not being accustomed to walking on pavements, his movements of the day had told upon him. Some of the muscles of his legs had grown tender, and he felt that a little more friction would take the last remnant of skin from his feet.

He gave up walking, but Wide-Awake Bert did not. That alert young man was always on the watch for a job, and he found the evening the best part of the twenty-four hours. He was widely known as a runner of errands, and as it was known that he would do his work well, business men and gentlemen of leisure were alike glad to employ him when they needed anything in his line.

On this particular evening he sauntered down the street until near the theaters, and then paused where he could be seen if wanted.

He had not long to wait.

A man who was dressed in flashy clothes came along at a quick pace, but stopped suddenly as he saw Bert.

"Hullo, boy!" he exclaimed; "are you busy?"

"Not a thing on hand," was the prompt reply.

"Do you want a job?"

"I do that."

"Then take this letter to the address given on it, wait for an answer, and bring it to me at the hotel yonder."

He pointed as he spoke, and the Street Steerer nodded.

"All right, sir."

"Here is half-a-dollar. Bear in mind that you are to bring an answer."

"I'll do it."

"I can't go myself, for I have an engagement at the hotel. I know your reputation for quickness of wit though."

"I've carried letters for half of Albany."

"All right—be off."

The man waved his hand and went his way, while Bert read the superscription on the envelope of the letter left with him. It was ad-

dressed to "Brian Drake," at a house on Broadway.

"Simple as rolling off a log," muttered Wide-Awake; "but I suspect I sha'n't get among church-members this trip. My employer is a high-flyer who looks like a gambler, and the house I'm to call at isn't in the best of localities. That don't concern me, though."

He walked away briskly, and was soon on Broadway. The house, when found, proved to be perfectly dark at the front with the exception of a light which shone very dimly in the hall, while thick curtains shut out all view.

The messenger rung the bell.

There was considerable delay, and then a coarse, red-faced girl made her appearance.

"Mr. Brian Drake in?" asked Bert, briskly.

The servant hesitated.

"Who wants him?"

"I do."

"What for?"

"Well, my business is with *him*, but I don't mind saying that I am to deliver this letter—"

"I'll take it."

"You'll excuse *me*, but there is to be an answer, and it is to him I must give the letter. Catch on?"

The Street Steerer spoke somewhat tartly, for he thought the girl too forward by far, and she yielded at once.

"All right; come in. Mr. Drake is busy, but he will soon be at leisure. You can wait in the parlor."

She stepped back and he entered. She relocked the door very carefully and then showed him the way to the parlor and lighted the gas. The room was small, but respectably furnished on a cheap scale; and the windows were very heavily curtained. Bert would not have noticed this had it not been for the previous signs that secrecy was desired.

"Mr. Drake is up-stairs, but he'll be down soon," the girl announced, and then she left the room.

Bert was alone, but he had neighbors near at hand. Folding-doors shut the back parlor off from view, but did not materially deaden the sound of voices there. Men were talking in loud tones, and as an occasional word was very audible to the boy, he was seized with a desire to hear more. Having decided that he was among folks not good enough for light of public acquaintance to shine upon, he did not think it any great misdemeanor to overhear all he could.

He moved close to the doors and found that he could hear very well.

"Business will be lively now," some one was saying. "The law-makers are here, and that always livens things up. There will be more pigeons to pluck, and a general contribution to our pockets all the way around."

"I, fur one, am dead bu'sted," lamented a second man.

"So am I."

"Any chance ter make a raise?"

"We are considering some points."

"It's a cold day fur me."

"Rense don't give his evidence."

"No. He's usually the biggest kicker out. How is it, Rense, don't your pocket ache?"

"Gents," responded a new voice, "I'm not so hard up as I might be."

"That's a wonder."

"I filled the treasury last night."

"How's that?"

"Job out in the country."

"Why the dickens don't you tell us about it? You are mighty mum, all of a sudden."

"Good things will keep, and I am willing you should recognize my importance. Having done that, I haven't the least objection to satisfying your craving for knowledge. Try the beer again, and then I will declaim!"

There was a rattling of glasses, and the men plainly obeyed the invitation to drink. Then Rense's voice arose again.

"Gents, I was standing on a certain street corner yesterday afternoon, when up came two men. They made a few careless remarks, and then one came right to the point."

"You are Rense Black, ain't you?" says he.

"That's my handle," says I.

"We have business with you," says he.

"Drive away, my hearties!" says I.

"We hear you are a good man to pick a lock."

"Gents, that gave me a shock, and I spoke up sharply:

"Are you drunk?" says I.

"Easy!" says he; "let me whisper a word in your ear."

"He whispered the word, and it was the name of an old pal of mine, down in New York."

JNA

He convinced me in short order that my pal had recommended me as the proper man for a delicate job.

"What's the job?" says I.

"Picking a lock."

"Where?"

"That's a secret, and if you work for us, and earn our money, you must be subject to certain conditions. The job lies out of town, and we will have no confederate who won't agree to our terms. These are that he will consent to have his eyes bandaged while still in Albany, and then go with us to the scene of action in a team without knowing where you are going, or, when there, without knowing where you then are. In brief, we shall take you out of town in a certain direction, but we wish to keep you ignorant of *where* the work is done, now and forever!"

"Here was a queer proposition, and I did not fall in with it readily. The idea of bouncing about the country with my eyes tied up did not bit me favorably; and I told him so, and said I thought I wouldn't tackle the job.

"There are ways to touch the hardest heart, and my new friend got at mine. He did it with hard cash. He convinced me that I could fill a long-felt want in my bank-account, and the bargain was duly made.

"At ten o'clock last night I met one of the men at a stipulated point; he bandaged my eyes; a team drove up; the three of us entered, and away we went.

"Gents, if I were to die for it I couldn't tell where we went. A few turns were made to confuse me, and then off we sped, but whether toward the north, west or south I don't know. We had quite a drive and finally brought up somewhere, and then the leader cheerfully told me to take off my blinder. I did so, and we got out. We were in a remote country place where not a light was visible, and the white stones of a cemetery glistened at one side.

"Now, get to work!" says he.

"Get to work! On what?" says I.

"Don't you see?"

"He pointed, and I saw for the first time that we were within a few feet of a big tomb, or vault—an adjunct of the cemetery.

"Is that the lay?" says I.

"You are to pick the lock of the tomb-door and let us in!" says he, briefly.

A whistle sounded from the back parlor, as though one of the listeners was surprised, but it would be safe to wager a good deal that the whistler was not half so interested as Wide-Awake Bert. The last revelation had brought back recollections of the coffin seen by Jonathan Berry, and made the story one of thrilling interest.

The Runner suddenly became very anxious to have Mr. Brian Drake take his time; the only thing to worry Bert was the fear that Brian would come before Rense had told his story.

The narrator continued:

"Knowing me as you do, gents, it will not be necessary for me to observe that cemeteries and tombs have no evil influence over me, and I was just as cheerful as though I had been told to bust a bank.

"I had my tools there, and I went for the lock.

"It proved to be a mighty stout one, and rusty as well. No novice could have cracked it, and my boss explained as I worked that the reason they had hired me was that they wanted the job to go undetected for some time; so they had not thought prudent to smash the lock.

"Well, I worked away in a cheerful fashion, while my companions took frequent pulls at a big flask they carried. The flask, by the way, was not empty when they began, but it went down fast.

"In due time I had the door open, and then we took a lantern and entered. It was a rather dismal place, with a row of coffins staring at us, but we didn't turn a hair. The men knew what they had come for, and soon picked out one of the boxes; and then we lifted it and carried it to the wagon.

"This done, we fixed the tomb door up all nice and pretty, and away we went. I suppose we traveled the same road we had gone by, but I can't say as to that. I was kept in the dark as much as ever, and when my eyes were unbandaged again, we were back at the spot where I had first entered the vehicle.

"My friends had got somewhat 'loaded' by tipping the flask too often, but they were straight enough to pay me as agreed upon, and exact a promise of secrecy. Two minutes later I was alone on the street and the wagon was rattling away with my friends and the coffin still in it.

"I looked at the time; saw that it lacked only an hour of daylight; made tracks for my own quarters; went to bed and slept until noon.

"That, gents, is how I got my empty pockets filled."

Rense Black finished his story, and one of the other men in the next room spoke.

"Medical students after a subject."

"Don't think so," Rense replied.

"What, then?"

"Can't say. It is easy to build up a theory, but what does it amount to? I am strong in the faith that the game was not that game; further than that I can't say."

A slight sound caused Bert to turn. Then he abruptly sprung to his feet.

He was no longer alone. A man had entered, and was regarding him with a hostile, threatening expression.

CHAPTER VI.

BERT GETS INTO TROUBLE.

THE Wide-Awake Runner's heart gave a jump and thumped solidly against his throat—at least, so it seemed to do.

Bert had been caught acting the listener, and he knew that lively times were ahead. His presence of mind did not desert him, however, and he promptly arose.

"Is this Mr. Brian Drake?" he asked.

"Yes: I am Brian Drake."

The reply was surly, and the man still scowled at Bert in a threatening manner.

"I nearly fell asleep, waiting for you. Here's a letter I have brought you, and there is to be an answer."

He extended the missive, and tried to assume an easy air. Drake's grimness of expression did not relax, but he took the letter and pointed to a chair some distance from the folding doors.

"Sit down!" he ungraciously directed.

Bert obeyed, and Drake read the letter. It was short, and soon finished, but when he had reached the end, the reader made no decided move. He sat rustling the paper in his hand and looking at vacancy, while Bert watched him anxiously in a half-secret way. The Street Steerer had an unpleasant conviction that he would yet be brought to book for listening at the doors, and he had no doubt that he was in a nest of thieves and law-breakers in general.

Brian took his time, but finally turned to the boy.

"Where did you get this note?"

"He gave it to me on North Pearl street."

"Do you know him?"

Bert would have claimed acquaintance promptly, but he knew that he would be detected in the trick.

"Never saw him before."

"Who are you?"

"Bert Barclay."

"Why did he send you?"

"My business is running errands."

"He made a mighty good selection!"

Drake spoke with manifest sarcasm, and then his expression grew more forbidding.

"Did he ask you to play the spy?"

"Did he? Certainly not."

"Then why were you listening at that door?"

"Listening!"

"That's what I said."

"You talk too freely," returned the Street Steerer, simulating indignation. "If you mean when you came, I'll say that you were so slow that I nearly fell asleep waiting for you."

"Gammon!"

Drake arose and opened the connecting doors.

"Come here, Trainor," he directed.

A well-dressed, decent-looking man appeared from the back parlor.

"What have you been talking about in there?" added the previous speaker.

"Why," Trainor answered, "we've been sipping our beer and having a general talk."

"Any privacy?"

"No. That is, only a story Rense told."

"Rense told a story, eh? Would he be willing the whole world should know it?"

"Would he? I should say not."

"Then we've got a case on our hands. This young blade has been listening at the door!"

"Take care!" cried Bert, feeling himself driven into a corner; "I didn't come here to be insulted."

"I don't care what you came for; it is what you have *done* I am talking about."

"You can't misuse me, just the same. I came here on an errand for some one I presume was a friend of yours, and the girl showed me in here and told me to sit down. I did so, and now you jump on me with both feet. Is that

the way you use your friends' messengers? Nice job, it is, to bring notes to *this* house!"

"Curb your passion, youngster!"

"Then use me decent, oldster!"

Trainor laughed.

"Go light with the boy, Brian! Such a spirited sparrow ought not to come to grief. Finish up your business, and let him go."

"I object!"

With these words another man popped out of the back parlor, and soon showed himself to be Mr. Rense Black.

"I guess I am the man who's got the most to say here," he announced. "If you caught this young hound listening, I object to his going out to spread his lies broadcast. I supposed I was safe in your house, Drake, and I spoke freely. I don't want any tattling!"

"Private matters, Rense?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll put our foot on this youngster."

"I've got something to say about that!" declared Bert. "I've seen a bit of life, if I am young, and you can't bully me a bit. I haven't interfered with your affairs, whatever you may say; and I won't allow you to interfere with mine. You lay a hand on me and I'll have the law of you!"

"Will you do it now, or wait until you get a chance?" sneered Drake. "How is it, men, shall we let him go out to tell lies about us, or—"

"Keep him here!" interrupted Rense. "A few weeks' retirement from active life won't hurt him, and by that time he can't do us any harm."

"All right. Boy, we don't intend you any harm, but we have a room up-stairs that you will like to live in. Rent and board will be free, and you will thus get a luxurious living without work. How is it—do you agree?"

"No, sir; I don't!" Bert retorted. "I've seen all of this house and those who live here that I want to. I'm going now, and I warn you not to stop me!"

He took a step toward the door, but Drake locked it and put the key in his pocket. He then advanced quickly, with the evident purpose of seizing Bert, but the latter had no intention of surrendering tamely. He retreated; then, as Drake continued to advance, dodged around the table.

"Break the cub in two!" growled Rense, as he, too, started to run the Street Steerer down.

It became clear that only quick, decisive action could save Wide-Awake, and he took measure accordingly. There was only one way of flight. That was through the back parlor, and though he did not know what lay beyond, he determined to make the attempt.

With the agility for which boys are noted he avoided both Drake and Rense and made a rush. The first thing he saw when he entered the other room was still another man at a table, but this person looked at him with eyes heavy with intoxication and made no effort to rise.

Beyond him was a door, and Bert tore this open and passed through just in time to evade Rense's outstretched hand.

The Runner had hoped to see a long hall which would reach to the front door and give him means of flight, and he was not disappointed. Hall and door were alike in sight, and Bert bounded that way.

He reached the door; he seized the knob and tried to open the way to freedom; the door stuck fast.

It was locked, and the key was not to be seen!

Rense and Drake were hurrying along the hall, and the fugitive had absolutely only one way open to him.

He turned and ran up the stairs.

In what way he would be benefited by this course he did not know, but it was "Hopkins's choice." He went up like a chamois-hunter, and was soon on the second floor. This brought him into almost total darkness, the only visible light being in the lower hall, but he did not stop. Hurrying along he soon found another door which he knew must lead into the front room.

He opened it and hurriedly entered.

One movement of his hand showed him that the key was in place, and he gave it a wrench and the door was locked. A stout obstacle was between him and his enemies.

In a moment more they were at hand, but the door stopped them. They began to pound lustily, and Bert knew that he had got to move to some purpose; they would break in the door rather than let him escape.

He had formed the plan of opening the window and either jumping out or calling for help, and

he proceeded to try this plan. His fingers touched the sash, but at that moment he was seized from behind by a pair of stout arms.

"What in blazes is going on here?" demanded a voice.

The darkness prevented the Street Steerer from seeing any more than a white-clad figure, but he realized that he had run plump into the sleeping-room of some man who must be one of the gang. He struggled bravely, but all in vain.

The pounding at the door continued, and, mixed in with it, were distinct cries in the form of calls for "Ben." Clearly, these were addressed to Bert's captor, and he dragged the boy to the door and turned the key.

A moment later they were face to face with Drake and Rense.

"Ben has got him!" cried Rense.

"And a good catch it is, too."

"What's the riot?" Ben demanded.

"He's a spy!"

"Is he? Then let me do him up!"

The speaker laid a rough hand upon Bert's throat, but Drake loosened his grasp.

"No violence!" he cautioned. "We have the young scoundrel, and that's enough."

"Better let me dispose of him."

"No."

"Is he a police spy?"

"That remains to be seen. He brought a letter here from Jabez, and it seems to be genuine. Boy, to what place were you to take the answer to the note?"

"Find out for yourself!" tartly replied the prisoner.

"All right; you only hurt your own case by being offish. I suspect now that the letter was forged, and we will take prompt steps to learn. The boy has acted the spy, anyhow, but it is a matter of great importance to us to find out whether he did it from a malicious impulse, or whether he was sent here by other parties. Rense, you and I can soon run Jabez down; suppose we go out and do it?"

"Leave the kid with me," suggested Ben.

"We'll take him up-stairs and secure him. You had better dress, Ben, and use a degree of supervision while Rense and I are away."

"All right. Toddle along with your kid!"

He turned back, and the other men began to drag Bert toward the stairs which led to the third floor.

Resistance was plainly wholly useless, but the Street Steerer was naturally too courageous to give up under any condition, and he continued to struggle as much as possible. Little attention was given to this, with the exception of rougher handling, and he was successfully carried up the stairs.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WINE IS IN; THE WIT IS OUT.

THE men entered a rear room, and Rense held Bert while Brian Drake lighted the gas. They were in a plain, scantily-furnished apartment, which was used for a sleeping-room.

Several pieces of rope lay on the floor, and Drake took these and advanced.

"You are not to be injured, boy," he explained, "but we must put a trifle of restraint upon you for awhile. Other men, having a spy in quod, would give him rough usage, but we always were noted for our softness of heart and head."

He drew Bert's arms together and tied them at the wrist. The captive did not resist; he was in their power, and he determined to take it as coolly as possible. His ankles were also bound, and then Drake indicated a staple and ring in the wall.

"You must not think you are in an old-time room of torture, or outlaw castle rubbish; that was put there simply to fasten a dog to, on occasion, and you shall see the dog directly. He will keep you company while we are gone."

He began to tie the prisoner to the ring.

"I protest against this!" Bert declared.

"Your protest shall go on file."

"It is an outrage."

"In your opinion."

"I have done absolutely nothing to be used thus."

"Oh! no; dare say if we were to look closely we should find wings sprouted on your ribs."

"All right, mister; you've got the whip-row now, but I'll see you later!"

"He's a game little bantam!" Rense exclaimed.

"All the more dangerous. Bring in the dog!"

Rense went, but was not long absent. He returned with a big Newfoundland dog in tow. Bert had expected to see a ferocious animal, but was agreeably disappointed. The dog had a

good face, and it was not hard to see that he had more real goodness in him than a dozen men like Drake and Rense possessed.

"Now, we'll be off!" added Drake. "Hercules will do as well as we. Here, dog—here!"

He attracted the dog's attention, and the intelligent animal looked at him and vibrated its tail.

"Watch him, Hercules!—watch him!"

Hercules uttered a subdued, guttural sound, thereby giving his promise, and then his masters went out. Bert and Hercules were left together.

The dog lay down within a few feet of his charge and fixed a steady gaze upon him.

"Good dog!" uttered the boy.

Hercules did not so much as wink.

"Good fellow! good fellow!" Wide-Awake continued.

Hercules remained impassive.

"I wish I could get you to go for help. I know you would if you could reason, for you are not a bad dog, and you are in evil hands. A good dog ought not to serve a bad master. Do you understand? I'll bet you know I want badly to make friends with you, but you are as grim as a statue. You've got good eyes and I believe that among dogs you rank high up. You would rank higher if you would contrive to get me free!"

There was a degree of pleasure in talking to the animal, and it certainly would do no harm if his good will could be obtained. This, however, was easier tried than done. Instinct and training alike impelled Hercules to be faithful; he might serve a bad master, but it was his one religion, as it were, to serve him well.

He had no notion of being faithless, and he remained as indifferent to all seductive words as the senseless walls.

Ten minutes passed.

There was the sound of footsteps on the stairs, slow and heavy, much as though an elephant, or some other unwieldy object, was shuffling up. The door opened.

Bert looked with more than ordinary curiosity and saw a round, red, vacant face. It was followed by a man, and he slowly entered. He held fast to the door and the wall, seeming to find a good deal of trouble in keeping his feet. Two things at once became apparent to the Street Steerer.

The man was very drunk, and he was the person who had sat at the table in the rear room down-stairs.

He navigated carefully, entered the room and closed the door.

"Have been—hic!—great trav'ler in m'days," he announced, with great gravity and equal huskiness of voice, "an' 'ave climbed Spunker Bill Monnymunt, Pike's Speak an' Wash'ton Monnymunt, but 'ave never seen a pair stairs s'long as them. Musht be prit' near up ter sky, now. Eh?"

He fixed a weak, wavering glance upon Bert, and only saved himself from a fall by a strong effort.

"Too far up to suit me," Bert agreed.

"You live—hic!—here?"

"I hope not."

"Seen ye 'fore?"

"I presume so."

"Member ye wal. Saw ye down-stairs."

"I wish I was there now."

"Why don't ye go?"

"Don't you see I am tied to the wall?"

"Fact, b'gracious! Who did it?"

"Some villains!"

"Brian an' Rense. S'pected it. Come up ter see. Hard lines. No 'sideration feelin's of a boy. 'S'poy myself, once."

"Don't you think this is hard?"

"S' no doubt on't."

Probably the man was as big a rascal as any of the others when sober, but it flashed upon Bert that he was just then in a condition when his mind was easily acted upon. There was maudlin pity in his expression, and it was a mine which only folly would leave unworked. Bert determined to make the most of it.

"These ropes pain me terribly," he lamented.

"Sorry for 't."

"They seem to cut right into my flesh."

"Tis true 'tis pity 'spity 'tis true!"

The fellow got hopelessly, utterly tangled up in his quotation, but his good will increased.

"I think it's hard to tie up a boy so," added Bert.

"Soder I; soder I."

"It's all a mistake."

"Mistakes will 'cur. 'Ave made'em, 'self."

"I never did these men any harm. I came here with a letter from one of their friends, but they got the notion I was an enemy, and now I have to suffer for it."

The drunken man nearly fell over, but he recovered his balance with a jerk so prodigious that it seemed a wonder that his head was not snapped off thereby.

"'Spurnin' shame!" he declared; which was the best he could do to say: "It's a burning shame!"

"How these ropes do hurt me!" added the prisoner, skillfully making his voice a melancholy moan.

"Feel for ye—feel f'ye!"

"If you would only untie me!"

"Why, cert! Why didn't ye speak on't before? Happy t'blige ye!"

He meant what he said, and at once lurched forward to make his promise good. He lost his balance and fell upon Bert, but without serious damage to either. The dog, who knew the drunken man well and, consequently, did not resent his presence, looked seriously at the mixed up mass of humanity, but did not lose his dignity.

"Wush er matter!" the fallen man asked. "Mus' 'a' be'n grease on the floor. 'Scurious cirzercumstance?"

He started to get up, but changed his mind, and, sitting on the floor, began to pick away at the knot in the rope.

"Mush 'a' be'n tied tight," he growled.

"You will get it, in time," Bert observed, encouragingly.

"S' no doubt on't."

"Pull hard!"

"Jes' what 'm doin'."

"There is the end of the rope."

"Don' 'er s'phose I kin see it?"

"Of course—certainly."

"M' eyesight never better; don' use no spez-zerkels ter see with. Jes' like er boy!"

Despite this high eulogy of his vision he did not get along well. In point of fact he could see only vaguely. He was too drunk to see otherwise, and everything around him appeared to be skipping about fantastically. The knot, itself, seemed to be dodging wildly around, but he was wise enough to know that this was a delusion; having been in his present condition a good many times before, he knew what sorry pranks liquor played with him.

Wide-Awake watched the work anxiously. If he could have got his fingers upon the rope he would have torn away the knot in short order. Time was precious. Drake and Rense might return at any time, and then his last hope would vanish.

Once his drunken friend settled back on the floor.

"Les' er dog untie it!" he suggested.

"You had better keep on."

"Don' know 'er seggashity o' that dog. 'S noble animal! Old Dog Tray, an' don' drink whisk. Whisk is zer enemy mankind. When zer whisk is in, yer wit's zout. Mel'choly fack! Mournful spetterkel!"

The speaker drew out his handkerchief and wiped away an accumulation of tears.

"Please go on," Bert directed.

"Wiz m' lecture on temp'rance?"

"No, no; with the rope."

"Fack! Had forgot it. Poor mersused boy! Mebbe orphan. So?"

"Yes; I am an orphan."

"'Stressin' cirzercumstance!"

He shed a few more maudlin tears, but Bert was growing so nervous over the delay that, to use an old expression, he "felt as though he should fly." When he flew he wanted to go on his feet and get out of the house. Every moment he expected his sober enemies to appear, and he proceeded to use all his eloquence upon his helper. Luckily, the latter remembered that he had a knife in his pocket, and he drew and opened it. There seemed considerable danger that he would cut Bert, instead of the rope, but he happily disappointed the boy.

The knife was keen, and a few slashes severed the rope. In a very short time Bert was free. He sprang to his feet.

"All right now?" asked the drunken man.

"Yes, yes."

"Correck! Glad on't. 'Muse y'self! Go an' play! Play ball—have good time. I wan' 'er lay down 'n sleep."

He leaned his head against the wall and, still sitting down, closed his eyes. No doubt he had utterly forgotten the circumstances under which the Street Steerer was there, and his advice was given without particular thought.

Bert lost no time. Drake and Rense must soon return, and an encounter with them would undo all he had gained. With a deep, but unspoken, hope that he would not meet them, he stole toward the door.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BOY BEHIND THE DOOR.

THE man did not stir, but the big dog looked with some suspicion. He was intelligent and faithful, and no stranger could have come in and liberated the boy. Hercules had his doubts, as it was. Instinct told him that Bert ought to remain there, but to stop him would be to oppose a man who was well known to him as his master's friend. As no one knows the full power of a dog's mental equipment, it may be that Hercules reasoned on this point. He took no more decisive action; he looked doubtful and lay still.

The Street Steerer opened the door.

All was dark and silent below, even the light in the lower hall having been extinguished.

He hastened down with light steps.

The second floor was reached without adventure. He went on and reached the lower hall. The front door was only a few feet away; he stepped forward to open it.

At that moment a key clicked in the lock outside, and the Runner recoiled. That could mean only one thing—some of the gang were coming in.

He had no time for flight, but he did the best possible thing under the circumstances; he shrunk back into the corner.

The door opened, swinging toward him, and two men entered.

The all-absorbing question was—would they see him?

The absence of light was greatly in his favor, but, for once, he was alarmed. His heart seemed to beat like a drum. He feared they would hear it, and actually held his breath. One of the twain turned and closed the door, thereby bringing himself face to face with Wide-Awake Bert. Only a feet separated them. Would his vision overcome the darkness and the Runner be discovered?

"What are we to do with that youngster?"

The question was in Drake's voice, and the reply came in tones unmistakably those of Rense Black:

"Keep him cooped up."

"He will be missed and inquired for."

"Nobody knows he came here, do they?"

"That's the question. The boy may have met with some young friend on the way and told him he was coming here."

"Not likely."

"Hang the luck! Why did he yield to the impulse to act the listener at the door?"

"Perhaps he did not get on to my story, but I dare not have him set loose."

"Certainly not, Rense. We must keep him shut up, here or elsewhere, but I do not like the outlook. I am afraid that young scamp will bring us into trouble."

While speaking Drake had carefully locked the door. The men had paused so near to Bert that he could almost have touched them, but they finally turned and began to ascend the stairs. A little more time and all would be well with Bert, for they had left the key in the door.

He waited anxiously; they reached the next floor and started for the last flight of stairs. That was his opportunity, and he did not neglect it.

Quickly he moved forward, grasped the key, turned it and opened the door. The fresh air fanned his face as though it was rushing to greet him, and it was an old friend very welcome, then.

A moment more and he was hurrying away.

The excitement of his adventure had not been without an effect, and he had no clear thought except escape. Thus it was that he finally found himself in a quarter near his own home, a course he had taken without the least premeditation. The discovery brought him to a sudden stop.

"Here I am, running away like a scared rabbit!" he exclaimed, in disgust. "Who ever heard of such nonsense? What I want to do is to go to the police and tell my story, and I'll do it right off, quick. Perhaps they can nab those fellows, and it is game well worth catching. Rense Black, by his own story, looms up as the accomplice of the men who have been scudding about the country with a coffin which nobody knows much about. I'll give the police a clew in the case, anyhow!"

Before this speech was finished he was hurrying toward the place where he and Jonathan Berry had already once appeared as witnesses. It was not far, and he soon rushed into the station. The captain was just making ready to go out.

"Say, captain, you're wanted!" Bert cried, breathlessly.

"Hallo! here's our young friend, again."

"Get some policemen and come with me."

"Where?"

"To a house on Broadway. One of the grave-robbers is there!"

He spoke somewhat vaguely, but made himself clear.

"What! is there more about the coffin?" cried the officer.

"Yes; I know one of the men who stole it."

"Where did they steal it from?"

"He don't know; he went blindfolded."

The captain contracted his brows.

"The dickens he did! That is a queer way to do a lawless job—"

"Captain, will you get some men and come with me? Time is flying, and the criminals will make off."

"Nevertheless, I shall have to hear your story, first, and decide for myself whether I ought to make a movement."

There was no help for it, and the Street Steerer tried to curb his impatience. He told his story in a quick, straightforward way, leaving out all unnecessary details, and the captain did not hesitate when he was through.

As soon as possible he got three additional policemen under way, and they started for Brian Drake's. The latter, it seemed, was well known to the police, and had long been under suspicion. Rense Black they did not know by that name, but thought he might be a "cracksmen" known to them as Jimmy Dick, and other aliases.

When they came in sight of the house it was much as when Bert had first seen it, except a light did not then show even in the hall. The suspicion became general that the officers had come too late.

The bell was rung—once, twice, thrice. There was no answer, and no sign of life. The captain became impatient. It was absurd to suppose every one was abed and asleep at that hour, so it was hardly to be expected that such a pretense would be made. The possibility that the gang were even then escaping by way of the rear was so suggestive that the officer ordered the door broken down.

His men flung themselves against it, and it did not long resist their efforts. It gave way, and nothing remained but to enter.

There was a possibility of attack, for it was not known how desperate the gang might be, and some precautions were taken. The lighting of the gas showed the front hall empty, and the same state of affairs existed all along the first floor. They ascended to that above—no one there.

Bert's chief interest was centered in the room where he had been bound to the ring, but when the door was opened it was the old state of affairs; not even the dog remained. In a word, no living thing but themselves was in the house. Even Hercules and the drunken man had been taken away.

The order was given to scatter and search the streets, hoping the men might be overtaken, and in this work Bert took an active part.

Another failure was scored.

It was very late when all search was abandoned. Brian Drake's house had been thoroughly searched in the hope of finding some papers of value, but that person had either been too wise to retain damaging evidence, or else he had taken all away in his flight.

At the captain's request Wide-Awake went with him to the station again.

"Now," said the officer, "I desire you to go through your story again, telling all in detail, and describing the men as minutely as possible."

The Street Steerer obeyed, and due attention was given these points. When all was told, the captain sat for a considerable time in deep thought.

"Beyond question," he finally said, "this story connects with what we have heard before. Parties to us unknown desired to get a coffin from some tomb. The readiness with which they made their selection proves that one certain coffin was desired; the ease with which they distinguished it shows that they had seen it before."

"Maybe, they were at the funeral," Bert suggested.

"Just my idea. Perhaps you have some idea where the tomb they visited is located?"

"No, sir; I haven't."

"Nor I, but we must learn before night falls. When we know whose body has been taken, we may possibly be able to grasp more of the mystery."

"You don't think medical students were in it?"

"Decidedly not! But to resume: Having secured the coffin they drove back to the city and Rense Black was dismissed. What then?

We can only conjecture. Two men drove away with the coffin, yet, a little later, when our policeman saw the team, there was but one man with it. There was but one when the frightening of the horse caused the wagon to be upset and the box spilled out."

"And the driver, too," suggested a subordinate, but the captain did not heed the interruption.

"Now, who were the men who frightened the horse and stole the box from the first thief?" was the next inquiry.

Nobody ventured a reply.

"The first men were rascals, but the other clique was as bad. Had they been honest, they would have hastened to undo the mischief. But what did they want of the coffin?"

"That box must have been a big prize," suggested Wide-Awake Bert.

"It would look like it. Now, the second stealing was pre-arranged. If that party had been merely after plunder, they would have left instantly when they saw that Number One's freight was a coffin. No, they wanted that box, laid for it and got it. This shows that they expected Number One to come along, and increases the mystery which may be embodied in the question: What in thunder was the first man taking the box to that place for?"

"Especially at daylight."

"As to that, he may have been delayed, and the hour was very early. Well, men, we are not to sit here and idly meditate upon the mystery: we must go out and solve it. We must learn from whence the box was taken, and who the deceased was. More than that, we must catch the guilty parties."

The speaker abruptly arose.

"Bert, you can go now," he added. "When we want you again we'll let you know. You have done a good deal to unearth the crime, and you shall be rewarded."

The Street Steerer was not reluctant to go, and after a few words more he left the station and returned to his home. That night he had startling dreams.

CHAPTER IX.

THE EVENTFUL CARRIAGE RIDE.

WIDE-AWAKE BERT and Jonathan Berry met at the breakfast-table the following morning. The former had been to the depot and captured two more country members, and Jonathan had considerable talk with them. He was sociable—though he assumed a slight air of superiority, in view of his experience of one day in public life at Albany—but his heart was not in the work.

He was anxious to talk with Bert, and he seized the first opportunity after breakfast.

"Got anything on hand?" he asked.

"Nothing in particular."

"Want ter go out with me?"

"Yes. Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere. I want ter see ef we won't fall in with them pesky critters ag'in. I'd give half my wages as assemblyman ter be the one ter bring them ter book—with your help."

"If you should have the experience I did last night you wouldn't be so anxious, perhaps."

"You don't mean ter say you seen them ag'in?"

"I do."

"Land sakes! Where? How? An' I was in bed, snoozin' like a bear in winter. I vim! it's too bad!"

The eminent gentleman from Green Hills shook his head and looked extremely grieved, and his manner was so unintentionally comical that Bert had to laugh.

"I would gladly have exchanged places with you," the Street Runner declared.

"Would you, though? Well, it's too late to make a bargain, but tell me all about it."

The Street Steerer was not reluctant. Having come out of his late adventure all right, he felt somewhat proud of it, and, besides, he was perfectly willing to thrill and amaze Mr. Berry. The result more than exceeded his greatest expectations. As he went on, Jonathan grew excited, and, what was more, his excitement momentarily increased. He interpolated many of his favorite exclamations, and became, as he confessed, "as nervous as a witch."

When the story was told he started forward.

"Allow me ter shake hands with ye!" he requested. "By gosh! you're a heroine—I mean, a hero!"

His broad palm encircled Bert's fingers.

"An' you come out on't alive!" he added, in admiring wonder.

"As you see."

"Why, it beats all natur'!"

"Do you think so?"

"Think so? I know it. You're a reg'lar David—a Samson—a Napoleon! You be, by sixty!"

"Oh! it's nothing."

"Nothin'! Wal, I should say it was a crusher on Albany. Why, ef sech things happened at Green Hills there would be the biggest bullaballoo you ever heern on. Old 'Squire Sanders would have 'em all up afore him inside twenty-four hours."

"You must remember Albany is larger than Green Hills."

Mr. Berry shook his head solemnly.

"I'm afeerd it's wickeder, too."

"Very likely."

"How long sence they've had a revival here?"

"A what?"

"A church goin's-on, ter convert sinners."

"Oh! I don't know."

"We hev one ev'ry year at Green Hills, right arter we git our pertaters dug; we can't tend to it afore that. There ought ter be one in Albany, I snum. But ter business! Shall we go out an' ketch these 'tarnal scamps?"

"We had better leave them to the police."

"Mebbe you're right," agreed Mr. Berry, his face falling. "I kinder wanted ter ketch them, but I s'pose the Albany constable would resent it ef an outsider come in an' got the start on him. Wal, Wide-Awake, s'pose we go ter ride?"

"To ride?"

"Yes. I want ter look the village over some more, an' I'll be condemn'd ef I kin tramp around on them pesky pavements. My feet feel like a b'iled cabbage, an' they're redder than beets. It's prodigal, but I'm goin' ter git a hoss an' wagon an' go ter ride, an' I want you ter go, too. We'll see the whole village, I vum!"

Bert was not reluctant. He knew, however, that Albany prices would stagger the gentleman from Green Hills, and had a way to save him that shock. He knew of a man who kept several teams, and, having one or two good driving horses always on hand, could usually be relied upon to furnish a road turnout at reasonable rates. Bert had before then piloted country members to the party in question, and they had been able to appreciate the beauties of Albany far better than they could have done with a more expensive outfit.

Jonathan caught at the suggestion, and they were soon at the stable of Mr. Kent, the man referred to. He looked grave when Bert made known his wishes.

"I had about decided to let no more teams," he observed.

"Why so?"

"They don't get good usage. Why, night before last I let a team—the brown mare and a light express—and what do you suppose happened?"

"What did?"

"When the mare came home she was all alone, and not only was the wagon scratched up as though it had been tipped over and dragged on the side, but the mare was wet with sweat and panting like a chased deer. I suppose the men got drunk, drove the mare like mad, had a tip-over, and then, to avoid bringing her in so badly done up, let her loose when near the stable."

"What time did she get back?" Bert eagerly asked.

"Not until morning—nearly two hours after daylight."

"Say!" exclaimed Jonathan, "let me see that hoss!"

Kent looked at him in surprise.

"Why?"

"He thinks he saw her in the morning," interrupted Bert. "Here, Mr. Berry—that's Brown Nell, as they call her."

Jonathan went for the horse in haste and eyed her like an expert. Nearly every man who lives in the country thinks he knows all about a horse from A to B. Usually this is a mistake, and the critic is no judge at all, but Mr. Berry was an exception to the rule. He knew a good deal about horsekind, and when he had once seen one of the species, he was not slow to forget it.

"It's the same hoss, by Cain!" he declared.

"Do you think so?"

"I know it."

"What's all this racket about?" asked the mare's owner.

"Have the police been to see you?" Wide-Awake asked.

"No, they haven't. Why in thunder should they?"

The worthy man spoke with considerable force, and Bert made haste to tell the story of

the first adventure of the series. The rest was not necessary.

Brown Nell's owner was angry. The fact that the long box was supposed to be a coffin did not seem to occur to him as strange or interesting; he thought only of his horse, and, being angry, vented his wrath in what he considered appropriate words. When he had become calmer, the Street Steerer suggested two things as equally appropriate to the occasion—first, that he should let them have a turnout; second, that he should at once inform the police, and give a description of the men who had hired the mare.

The last suggestion impressed Mr. Kent as being very good, but it was not until he had been urged somewhat that he agreed to furnish a team. Finally he hitched up Brown Nell, and while Jonathan and Bert drove away, he made haste to see the police.

Mr. Berry was somewhat excited over the fresh discovery, and not a little elated to know they had learned where the team which carried the long box had come from, thereby outdoing the police, but he finally brought his mind down to common affairs, took due notice of things by the way, and condescended to remark that Albany was a "mighty pooty village."

They drove on steadily, and Brown Nell showed no signs of having sustained injury in her recent rough experience. The houses by the way grew scarcer, and they neared the suburban part of Albany. Jonathan opposed a suggestion to turn back; they were getting where he could see more of Nature, and he declared that the vicinity was "a tarnation sight finer" than the "stone roads" within the city limits.

He was in fine spirits, and bowed deeply to every one they met or passed.

"Of course they know I b'long ter the Assembly," he explained, "an' I don't want them ter think I'm stuck up a bit!"

He was a source of constant amusement to Bert, and as the ride pleased both, they finally found themselves several miles from the city.

"There's a village down yonder," Mr. Berry finally remarked, "an' when we git there we'll turn 'round. This is a pooty well-kep' buryin'-ground."

They were passing a neat cemetery, and he took particular notice of it. There were some features about it, he admitted, not in vogue at Green Hills, and he declared that he should mention them to his town'speople when he returned home.

They had nearly reached the end of the cemetery when Bert suddenly grasped the old gentleman's arm.

"See there!" he exclaimed.

"See what? D'y'e mean that squirrel?"

"No, indeed! Don't you see that iron door? There is a tomb there!"

"So I see, an' a right good place it is fur one. That little knoll was made a-purpose, I do b'lieve—"

"Is that all you believe?"

"Eh?"

"Don't it suggest anything to you?"

"We are all goin' the same way. Yes, yes; you're right, Bertie. Day by day our weak an' decayin' buddies—"

"Jonathan Berry, do you remember the story I heard in Brian Drake's house? Do you remember that the tomb robbed by the ghouls was beside a cemetery, with a village close at hand—"

"Land sakes!"

Jonathan caught the idea at last, and he rose in the carriage.

"They broke the lock, didn't they?" he asked.

"No; they picked the lock; but it isn't likely it was left fastened when they went away. Wait for me!"

Wide-Awake was excited, himself, and the prospect of fresh discovery spurred him on.

He sprang to the ground and hastened to the door of the tomb. As before stated, it was of iron, and a huge padlock seemed to interpose a strong barrier to all meddlers; but when he grasped the lock it fell apart. The door was not fastened; the padlock hung there as useless as a blade of grass.

"It is the place!" Bert cried, in fresh excitement.

CHAPTER X.

THE CASE OF CAP GORDON.

JONATHAN leaped out with agility which surprised himself and hurried to Bert's side.

"Hev ye got proof?" he asked.

"The door is not fastened. See!—the padlock was merely closed, not locked. This was as I understood. The man Rense Black was called into the case because the others did not want to smash the lock. That would have attracted

attention and caused discovery right away, so Rense was got as an expert to open the door. When they left it was kept so that only an examination like what I have made would reveal the fact that they had been here."

"I vum! I guess you're right."

"See! There is a scratch on the padlock—yes; several of them. Those were made in picking the lock."

"You ought ter be a detective, I do declare!"

"I think we have found the place."

"Of course we hev."

"Look there, too! Some team has driven up here lately. See the wheel-tracks!"

"You're a reg'lar witch, Bertie!"

"What are we to do?"

"Do! We'll tell on the critters!"

"Yes, but how?"

"Go back ter the constable o' Albany—"

"Why not go to this village? We can find out who has died lately, and what box is missing—"

"Why, of course we can. And I never thought on't! I declare you hev a mighty good head on ye, an' I'll bet you'll git ter be an assemblyman afore ye die! I really think it; an' no jokin', Bertie!"

"You are very kind, Mr. Berry, and I thank you, but please don't call me 'Bertie.' 'Bert' is good enough for me. I think boys ought to have good, sensible names. Do Charlie, Frankie, Eddie, Jimmie, Percy and Clarence sound as well as plain Charles, Edward, James, John and Joseph? I think not. Soft names should be left for girls, or, better still, not be used at all."

"You're right, as usual; just as is ter be expected. I'll bear in mind your name is Bert."

By this time they were getting into the carriage, and they drove to the village without delay. They were not certain just whom they ought to see, but stopped the first man they met and asked where they could find an officer of law.

"I'm a sheriff!" was the prompt reply.

"You be?" cried Jonathan. "Say, do you know of any tarnation goin's-on about here?"

"Eh?"

"Mr. Sheriff," interrupted the Street Steerer, "do you know that the tomb over yonder is open?"

"Open? Impossible!"

"Go back with us and see. Jump right in!"

The direction was obeyed promptly.

"I can't see how it got open," said the sheriff; "though it may be they forgot to lock it."

"Has it been open lately?"

"Yes; a body was put in there only a few days ago."

"Whose was it?"

"Old Captain Gordon's."

"Just when was it put there?"

"Tuesday."

This was the day before the eventful night when Rense Black went *somewhere* and aided to rob a similar place, and Mr. Berry became excited.

"It doss beat all Natur'!" he declared.

"What is eating you fellows, anyhow?" somewhat intelligently inquired the sheriff.

"Have you been notified that a box, supposed to be a coffin, has been seen in Albany, and was stolen from some outside town or other?" Bert inquired.

"No."

"Then the police have not been very smart."

The sheriff was on the point of speaking, but they had reached the tomb, and he contented himself with springing out and running to the door. He did not pause there. Throwing it open he entered quickly.

"I'm as nervous as a witch!" declared Jonathan.

Wide-Awake did not answer, and in a moment the sheriff reappeared at the door.

"The box is gone!" he cried.

"We've hit it, Bert!" Jonathan asserted.

"Ghouls have been here and robbed the tomb of old Captain Gordon's remains. Quick!—tell me what you know about it!"

The sheriff was greatly excited and indignant.

"I'm a member o' the Assembly," ponderously began Mr. Berry, but he was interrupted by the sheriff.

"Waste no words. Tell it quickly!"

"Land sakes! you do it, Bert."

Jonathan was getting a good deal upset by events which were not only far more exciting than any he had ever experienced, but which were following so fast that he could not get calmed down "between spells," as he confessed to Bert.

The Wide-Awake Runner had a tongue, and

he used it. In a very short time he had given an outline of the events at Albany, and Rense Black's story, and the sheriff scowled belligerently.

"Medical students, I'll bet!" he declared.

"The Albany police don't think so."

"What do they think?"

"They are at a loss, but infer that the body may have been stolen and held for ransom."

"That's nonsense. Cap Gordon did not have a hundred dollars to his name when he died. He was a lazy spendthrift, while as to relatives, I never heard that he had any; and if he did not one would be foolish enough to pay a nickel for his remains. Perhaps I speak too harshly—Cap was good-hearted enough, but was a never-do-well."

"Wal, they've stole him, ain't they?" asked Mr. Berry.

"Yes."

"What ye goin' ter do about it?"

"Raise Cain!"

"You'd better raise Cap Gordon."

"Men, drive me to Cap's late home!"

The sheriff sprung into the carriage, improved upon his own order by taking the reins himself, and sent Brown Nell spinning down the road merrily. He did not pause until he drew up in front of a plain cottage.

"Gordon boarded here for ten years," he announced. "He did fairly well as a citizen until he came out of the army, but gradually went to the dogs after that. Mrs. Hannah Baker owns this house, and she can tell us more about Cap than any one else."

They entered the house without ceremony. A tall, bony old woman sat knitting in a high-backed, old-fashioned chair. She had a grim, determined face, and Bert Barclay was by no means favorably impressed.

"I say, Hannah, what have you done with Cap?" abruptly cried the official.

Hannah raised two calm eyes.

"If you want to see him, go to the tomb," she stolidly returned.

"Suppose he ain't there?"

"Then go to the tavern."

"Hannah, did he have relatives?"

"Never heard of any."

"What did he say when sick?"

"Nothing."

"No mention of relatives, eh?"

"No."

"Do you know where his original home was?"

"Hum!" growled Hannah. "I asked him once, and he told me to mind my own business. You can bet I never asked him again. No; I don't know where he came from."

"Well, his body has been stolen."

"They will bring it back when they see who they've got," was the grim answer.

"Come, Hannah, you wrong Cap. He was good-hearted; he boarded here long years and always paid his bills; and always used you well. Why abuse him?"

"Mr. Sheriff, Cap Gordon was a good man. I speak far better of him than I would of you if you were dead, for the very good reason that he better deserved it."

The questioner looked angry for a moment, and then broke into a laugh.

"I give it up, Hannah. You were a good friend to Cap, as he was to you, but you have no longer an interest in him. We will leave you to your sweet meditations."

"It will be a great relief."

Hannah sent the retort after them as they moved away. They were soon outside the house.

"No use to look for sympathy there," continued the sheriff. "In her way she is all right, but it is a mighty poor way. I only wish she had been able to tell us more about the old man, though the idea of there being a mystery in his life seems absurd. I don't think highly of the opinion given by your Albany police; I believe medical students were at the bottom of the whole plot."

"Ef that's so," answered Jonathan, "who was the chaps that stole the box from the first stealers?"

"Other medical students."

"They didn't look an artom like doctors."

"The plotters could hire men to do their bidding, couldn't they?" severely asked the sheriff.

"I s'pose so," Mr. Berry meekly agreed.

"Be that as it may, I am going to have the box back and beat those Albany officers. Cap Gordon may have been a good-for-nothing, but this outrage shall not go unpunished. I want you two to stay here until I consult with the town officials and determine what to do. You are hereby both invited to dine at my house."

The sun marked the hour of noon, and the

idea of getting a dinner without having to pay for it so pleased the gentleman from Green Hills that he declared himself wholly at the sheriff's service.

He saw a good deal of red-tape before he left the town. After dinner the officials assembled, visited the tomb, looked around as wisely as possible, held a conference, considered the case—in brief, used up a good deal of time without making much of an advance. They finally resolved to catch the culprits as soon as possible, and, having aided them to reach this sage conclusion, Mr. Berry and the Street Steerer were told they could go.

They went willingly, and were soon seated behind Brown Nell and bowling along on the homeward road. It was their mutual opinion that they would have done much better had they gone at once to Albany, instead of calling upon the would-be Socrateses of the village, but it was too late to think of that, and they consoled themselves with the thought that they could soon make their report in the city.

They were not destined, however, to reach that place without a startling experience by the way.

CHAPTER XI.

TOUGH COMPANIONS ON THE ROAD.

"WHEN the Assembly meets I shall be heard from!"

Mr. Jonathan Berry made the assertion gravely as he and Bert drove homeward.

"Have you a new bill in mind?" asked Bert, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"I hev nothin' shorter. I'm goin' ter hev a force app'inted ter be called Graveyard Police."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir! I'm goin' ter stop these goin's-on. I hear too much on't nowadays. Tombs are robbed, an' graves are robbed. It must be stopped. We bury our dead an' put on the headstone, 'Rest in Peace,' then along comes some scamp an' digs up the deceased. Is that restin' in peace?"

The eminent law-maker spoke in an aggrieved tone, and Bert heartily replied:

"Decidedly not! What would be the special duties of your 'Graveyard Police'?"

"Ter patroll buryin'-grounds an' look arter things; an' ter make sure no harm was done, I would have 'em visit each an' every grave in order, at reg'lar times, the same as you tol' me the city police go 'round an' try doors ter see ef they are locked."

"A capital idea."

"My new force," added Mr. Berry, with considerable enthusiasm, "will be required ter make sure o' their work, an' put down a record in their book ev'ry time they visit a grave, like this: 'John Smith, aged fifty, all right!' 'Sarah Small, died young, all right!' 'Betsey Brown, aged eighty-two, all right!' These records would be ter make sure the police was faithful."

"Your bill will be a great reform," Bill answered, barely repressing the inclination to laugh in the law-maker's face; serious as was the subject, Jonathan's way of meeting it was comical in the extreme.

"A reform is needed, for the condition o' this part o' the State is shockin'. These things wouldn't be tolerated at Green Hills. We'd put them through a course of sprouts, you bet!"

Mr. Berry cut viciously at the air with his whip, and then fell into meditation. Possibly he was considering the various branches of his bill, and thinking how he could make his reform sweeping and impregnable.

While they were thus progressing Bert noticed that another team was overtaking them, but as it rolled along quietly and smoothly, he gave it no particular attention. It came nearer and, turning to one side, set out to pass them. This brought the occupants of the carriage, who were three men, more fully into view, and the Street Steerer gave them closer notice.

This was followed by a start on his part, and he suddenly grasped Jonathan's arm, but, just then, affairs took a new turn.

Just as the other team drew to the front, one of the men leaped out, and in a moment more he had seized Brown Nell by the rein and brought her to a stop.

Mr. Berry aroused from thought in high indignation, but he looked up to witness a startling sight. The second horse had been stopped; the riders had turned around; and the law-maker saw a revolver bearing full upon him. The sight dumfounded the good man.

"Hold up, there!" sternly commanded the fellow who held the revolver. "Don't try to run, or I'll spot you!"

"Good land!" gasped Mr. Berry, "what do you mean?"

"Business!"

"Ef this is a joke—"

"It is not."

"Then what in tarnation do ye mean by stoppin' us on the highway—"

"I told you we meant business, and so we do. We demand your surrender! If you resist we'll do you up the worst way; if you try to run, it will be the same thing."

"Say, do you know who I be?" cried Mr. Berry.

"We don't care a continental."

"I'm a member o' the Legislature—"

"What of it?"

"Ef you don't let us go, I'll put ye through a course o' sprouts—I will, by Cain!"

"Catch your hare before you cook it, old man."

"Highway robbery won't be tolerated—"

"You have talked enough. You and the boy are our prisoners, and I am going to get into the carriage with you, take the ribbons and drive where I see fit. That won't be to Albany!"

"I'll resist—"

"Do you see this revolver? Well, if you cut up rusty I'll blow your head off!"

The speaker leaped out of the other carriage, advanced and thrust the revolver within a few inches of Jonathan's nose.

"Shall I fire?" he grimly asked.

Mr. Berry recoiled. He was not a coward, but in the little quarrels he had experienced during his career at Green Hills, everything had been settled with bare fists. The idea of having recourse to deadly weapons was horrible to contemplate—and so was the revolver horrible to contemplate. Mr. Berry thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Here!" he gasped; "take my money! You're welcome to it, though I hope you'll use it in charity and other good objects—"

"Hang your money!"

Wide-Awake Bert plucked at Jonathan's sleeve.

"These men are our old foes!" he whispered.

The revolver-bravo looked up quickly.

"Right you are, boy! Old man, are you so big a fool that you don't know the man whose gold watch you looked at in the doorway on North Pearl street?"

Mr. Berry nearly collapsed. In his excitement he had again been late with recognition, but the man was really the sharper who had been so anxious to get the law-maker's check cashed at the bank, and, unless Jonathan was in error, one of the two who had stolen the long box from the original stealer that morning when the series of adventures began. And the second check-swindler was he who was holding Brown Nell.

"Land sakes!" groaned the dismayed assemblyman.

The man with the revolver vaulted into the carriage.

"Make room for me here!" he ordered. "The boy can sit in the middle."

"I'd like to know what you mean to do!" declared Bert, spiritedly.

"Would you?"

"Yes."

"I've known small boys to get their earst twisted off!"

"Don't you try it with me!"

"I make no promises. You blocked our game on North Pearl street, and I have no love for you. It is possible that you will both squeeze through the crush without personal harm if you are wise, but if you turn kickers you will get done up. You are our prisoners; understand that and make no more talk. I shall take charge of your team, and drive where I please. I shall have my revolver ready for use, and my friends will follow right after us in the other carriage, ready to spot you if you resist. We may meet, or see, other persons. In case we do—what then?"

"I'll call fur help!" Jonathan declared.

"You will?"

"Yes."

"Mister," pronounced the man, in a savage voice, "if you do that I'll blow you to chaos. We are not in this game for fun; we mean business all the way through, and rather than fail we will go to the extreme and kill you. Understand?"

Jonathan responded with a groan.

"I'd like to know what you mean to do with us," Bert asserted.

"Would you, my young cub? Well you shall see before many hours. We will try to pay the debt we owe you!"

Before he finished speaking he had the horse in motion, and they were speeding down the

road. Mr. Berry was in a towering rage. The indignity made him angry through and through, but he resented the outrage to himself as a citizen far less than as an assemblyman. It seemed almost incredible that such things should happen to any one in Nineteenth Century, but that any person should dare to thus maltreat a member of the Assembly—words would utterly fail to express the good gentleman's opinion on that point.

Indignant as he was, he did not lose all sense of prudence. There were three men against them, and it was likely that all were as thoroughly armed as the leader. For an old man and a boy to resist the trio of desperadoes without weapons would be folly.

Both prisoners had considerable hope of meeting some party on the road whose numbers would be strong enough to make an appeal for help reasonable, but this hope soon vanished.

They turned from the main road and went off on a much smaller, little-traveled one, and the conviction became strong that they were doomed to obey the will of their captors.

Jonathan looked at Bert, shook his head and sighed profoundly, but that did not improve the situation a particle. As for the Street Steerer, he was downcast enough, but there was rebellion in his mind.

Darkness was drawing near, and he was determined to make a dash for liberty as soon as it was dark enough to render their captors' aim uncertain, in case he was fired upon in flight.

His plan was not tried.

After driving for half an hour they reached a big, old-fashioned house, which stood well back from the road in a grove of handsome trees, and there they turned from the highway and drove into the yard. That they were bound for the old house seemed certain, and Bert again thought of making a dash for liberty, but the second team was so close that he very prudently decided not to try it.

They paused at the door, and the other men came close to their carriage.

"Get out!" ordered the leader.

"What for?" asked Mr. Berry, sulkily.

"Because I tell you to."

"Strikes me we ought ter hev a word ter say where we go visitin'."

"Get out!"

"I protest—"

"Get out!"

The words were almost shouted, and the speaker grasped Jonathan's arm and gave him a push which almost sent him out of the carriage. It was enough; the law-maker descended; but he turned around at once.

"You come down here," he vociferated, doubling up his fists, "an' I'll give ye the all-fireddest lickin' you ever had in yer life! I'll learn ye to insult a member o' the—"

The sentence remained unfinished. The men by Mr. Berry's side each seized an arm of the belligerent gentleman and hustled him toward the house, while the leader proceeded to serve Wide-Awake Bert in the same way.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HEAD VILLAIN AT HAND.

BERT knew the folly of resistance, but he looked up at his captor with flashing eyes.

"Look out that you don't bite off more than you can chew," he cautioned.

"How's that?"

"You may get left."

"We'll run the risk."

"Villainy only prospers for a season."

"Neither does snow, but it gets there again another season, just the same."

"I shall live to see you in prison, mister!"

"It won't be my first term there."

They had reached the door, and Bert was shoved in without ceremony. His first impressions of the house were not favorable. The edifice was one of ancient date, and the ceiling was low and black. The air was not good, and dust and mold seemed to hold carnival there. It occurred to the boy that human voices had not often been heard there in the last decade.

He and Mr. Berry were escorted to a side room, after which the leader went out, and they were left in charge of the other men. A fire burned in a rusty stove at one side, and they were ordered to sit down near it. This they did without objection, but Jonathan was in a vicious mood.

"I have heerd o' pirates an' outlaws afore now," he remarked, looking grimly at the Street Steerer.

"Yes."

"They ginerally live in some old, tumble-down house."

"Yes."

"With trap-doors, slidin'-panels, secret passages, an' hopgoblins."

"Just so."

"An' wind up by gittin' hung."

"If any one is hanged in this case, it will be you," remarked one of the captors.

"I s'pose you want to hold us fur ransom. Wal, I'll send word ter mother an' Sally not ter pay a cent."

"You seem to know your market value."

"Sir, I'm a member o' the Assembly!"

"Which one—of tramps?"

Mr. Berry's lower jaw fell, and he shook with indignation until his spectacles fairly danced upon his nose. He then and there invited the speaker to fight him, and, when the proposal was rejected, agreed to "tackle" both men at once. The warrior-spirit was rampant in the good old gentleman, but it found no vent; the men refused to fight, and when Mr. Berry insinuated that he would not wait for their consent, they showed their revolvers in a way which took his spirit all away.

The heroism of Green Hills was strong within him, but powder and lead he did detest.

Half an hour passed before the third man reappeared. When he came in he nodded to the prisoners.

"Come up-stairs," he directed.

"What fur?"

"To see our boss."

Jonathan arose with alacrity.

"Well, I'm glad ef there is one responsible person 'round here. I'll talk with him, an' I hope he will show some hoss-sense; but I dare say he will prove a tarnation Bluebird, or Captain Kidd!"

This growl went unheeded, and they were conducted up-stairs. There, as below, was a dreary, inhospitable air, as though they were in a house of bygone days, but when they entered a room at one side they found it rather pleasantly located and fairly furnished, while a big fire blazed at one side.

Near this sat an old man, and they knew they were at last face to face with "the boss."

He looked at them keenly from eyes that were well shut in by hair and beard of deep gray, and then quietly crooked his forefinger in the direction of some chairs.

"How-de-do?" quoth Mr. Berry. "Hope we see ye well? Glad we found ye at home, fur we've always longed to see such an eminent man!"

Mr. Berry was sarcastic, but it was all thrown away. Not a word answered the second old man, but his fingers remained crooked, and the tip pointed toward the chair. Bert set a good example by sitting down, and Jonathan, growling a little, followed his lead. Both looked curiously at the new master of their destinies.

He did not look to be a rascal. There were lines upon his face which, perhaps, were not usually seen in that of a truly good man, but truly good men are scarce, and the gray-haired person could have given points to some preachers as far as looks went.

He cleared his throat.

"My name," he answered, "is Eliphaz Griggs!"

"Does it hurt you?" demanded Mr. Berry, curtly.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Jonathan Berry, Esquire, o' Green Hills, this State, an' a lawfully-elected member o' the Assembly!"

This was intended to be a crusher. But Mr. Eliphaz Griggs did not seem affected in the least.

"Do you want to get into trouble?"

"Should say I was in, already!"

"You will get into worse if you don't mend your ways."

"Mebbe you think you kin stop the chariot o' fate by holdin' us here, but it can't be done. It is generally knowed you hev stole Cap Gordon's body, an' jestic will be arter you like a hungry wolf."

"What do you know about Cap Gordon?"

"I know how you stole his box."

"Did you know him?"

"No; but I've jest been talkin' with them who did."

"They know no good of him I'll swear."

"That's what they said."

"A miserable vagabond. What do you care what becomes of his remains?"

"Mister, I've got some human feelin' left. When we all git done with this life—we deserve rest. It's a bit hard on us all, this life is: an' I can't say we walk in a bed o' roses. Some on us draw good things o' the lottery an' git along wal enough, but there are them who don't. I s'pect some men an' women go through life without knowin' one happy hour, or seem' one

gleam o' hope. I pity them poor critters; I do, by gracious! I hev an idee Cap Gordon was one o' that kind, for when he died he hadn't a relation ter foller him to the tomb. There is rich an' poor, good an' bad, lucky an' unlucky; but when we git done with the turmoil o' life, there is one thing we all deserve—we ought ter be left in peace to our last, long sleep!"

Jonathan spoke with great feeling, and was thoroughly in earnest, but Eliphaz Griggs did not appear to be affected.

"Hum! hum!—a good deal of empty talk over old Gordon!" he exclaimed.

"Respect the dead, sir!"

"So I will—all but Gordon! I knew the man. He was such an admirable mixture of knave and fool that he could be both at once. He was never anything else, or more, or better."

"You stole his body out o' revenge!" indignantly exclaimed Mr. Berry.

"For what?"

"Because you hated him."

The man's lip curled scornfully.

"I knew no good of him!" he admitted.

"Did you know him well?"

"We were boys together."

"Likely's not you hated him then."

"You don't know the facts," severely replied Griggs. "If Gordon had been wise he would never have sunk so low. I advised him well—"

"Here's the Pharisee o' Scriptur'!" boldly exclaimed the indignant assemblyman.

"As boys, Gordon and I often played together."

I was a favorite with his mother, and while she saw his weaknesses, she hoped my influence would bring him out well. Say what you will, he owed me much. When boys, I have given him my fruit to eat, my toys to play with, my bed to sleep in, my money to spend. As to the money, I continued it a long while. Only for me, Gordon would often have gone hungry; when he would not work, I gave him means to buy food. He has worn my clothes, and, once they were on his back, he kept them until they were worn out. When he enlisted as a soldier I helped him more, and he would never have been promoted as a captain had it not been for my influence."

"Can't you pile it on thicker?"

"When he left the army he sunk low—very low—and I deserted him. I have sat at my window and seen him rolling in the gutter, helplessly drunk. I let him lie there. Once, only, in the last ten years, have I befriended him; I paid his fine when he was arrested during a carouse. Since then, I am happy to say, I have never met him. This, Mr. Huckleberry, is the man—"

"Berry, sir; my name is Berry."

"Excuse me. Such was the man, sir, you are so interested in now."

"You've made a good many words," returned Jonathan, stoutly, "but you've dodged the p'int. I've nothin' ter say about Cap Gordon as a man, an' it's too late ter help him; but it's an outrage ter merlest his body."

"Do you say I have?"

"Yes."

"Prove it!"

"Go before the Legislature with me, then!"

"I choose my own company, and mix with scallawags no more since Cap Gordon shuffled off the mortal coil."

The audacity of the statement almost took good Mr. Berry's breath away, and before he could recover, Eliphaz added:

"I have enjoyed this talk with you very much, Mr. Blueberry—excuse me; I mean Mr. Berry—and I hope you will be influenced by what I have said. Consider it; remember what sort of a man Gordon was; waste no sympathy on a vagrant; and mind your own business!"

A smile broke out on the speaker's face as he abruptly changed his tone from pathos to rudeness; then he turned to one of the other men.

"Take these cattle away and put them in the dungeon. Load them down with chains, and give them only water to live on. Ay—more than that! Give them no water for forty-eight hours, and let them see how they feel then. Their impertinent meddling shall not go unpunished. Away with them!"

He waved his hand imperiously, but Jonathan had something more to say.

"I protest—"

"Take them away!"

"I'm a member o' the—"

"Drag them off!"

"I'll have the law o' you—"

"Shoot them, if they resist!"

Possibly there was a grain of the ridiculous in Mr. Berry's frantic efforts to speak, but he and Bert failed to see it in that light as their enemies pounced upon them.

CHAPTER XIII.

A RED-HOT EXPERIENCE.

JONATHAN was less reconciled than ever to his fate, and not only struggled violently but managed to give his enemies several severe punches, but he might as well have spared his efforts. He was overcome, and his enemies dragged him and Wide-Awake Bert out of the room.

As they passed the door he sent an angry threat toward Eliphaz Griggs, but that gentleman only kissed his hand to the departing statesman in a sarcastic way.

The younger men were angry, and they hustled the prisoners along the hall rudely. The journey was short; they were not taken to a "dungeon," as Griggs had said, but to a room at the further side of the house. That, however, had been arranged for a prison, the windows being boarded up strongly, and all way of escape evidently cut off.

The darkness was broken by a lighted lamp on the table, and the room was seen to be uncarpeted, and without anything more luxurious or abundant in the way of furniture and conveniences than the table, two miserable chairs, and a few blankets on the floor.

"Here you are!" announced one of the captors.

"I should say we be!" groaned Jonathan.

"Isn't this good enough for you?"

"Mebbe it's as good as the quarters in prison I'll send ye to, later."

"It will be later, you can bet."

"It couldn't be before, could it, ye fool?" asked Mr. Berry with a fresh burst of wrath.

"Nothing but the orders from our boss keeps me from thrashing you for that. As it is, I won't soil my hands with you. So-long, old gent!"

"Your race won't be long!"

Jonathan called out this assertion as the door was closed, but he was answered only with derisive laughter. Their enemies closed the door and locked it.

"It's a wonder ter me," deposed Mr. Berry, "that sech things can happen in this century. They couldn't, at Green Hills. Why, we'd hev them scamps up afore the jestic in short order. One time, 'long 'bout 1873, I painted the fence ter my front yard. Next mornin' there was a row, an' I was the central figure in it. Some scamps had come 'long, an' dabbed spots o' red paint all over my white paint. By Cain! wa'n't I mad! But I got even with 'em. I found out 'twas Salathiel Tewsbury an' Peltiah Sanders that did it, an' I got them took up. Cost 'em a dollar an' costs, apiece, too. That's the way we do things at Green Hills!"

"Mr. Berry, we are in a serious fix," Bert observed.

"Well, I should say so."

"What shall we do about it?"

"Hev the law on 'em!"

"Yes—when we get out. But are we going to stay here and await their pleasure?"

"Ef you'll shew me a way, I'll raise Ned!"

"We must think of a way to escape, or we are liable to remain here for a month."

"Land sakes! an' the Legislature meets next week!"

Jonathan held up both hands and looked the image of dismay.

"You can see how great the need of action is."

"Wal, I should say so. Ef I ain't in my seat when the Assembly meets, there will be Cain ter pay. I mean ter set there an' keep bad bills from gittin' through, an' the 'hull State may be ruined ef I don't git around. Say, who is that Eliphaz Griggs? I'd like ter know."

"We will know, sometime."

"He hated Cap Gordon awfully, didn't he?"

"He didn't speak very well of him."

"I don't b'lieve half he said; he ain't the man to help anybody as he said he helped Gordon. Mebbe the old chap is a doctor, and has had the body stole fur dissection."

"Doctors of his age don't usually want such things, unless they have medical students with them."

"That's a fack. It's queer!"

Jonathan fell into thought again, but the Street Steerer proceeded to make a survey of the room. There was little consolation to be gained. The windows were tightly boarded, and there was absolutely nothing at hand with which to force off the boards. The only visible way of escape was by the door, and not only had that been locked upon them, but the house was so full of men that an attempt to escape might fail even if they could pass the door.

They appeared to be as hopelessly in the toils as though they were in a veritable prison-cell.

Mr. Berry was not inclined to take matters philosophically. With the dreadful idea once in his mind that he might not be able to take his seat as an assemblyman at the appointed time, he was like a wild animal kept away from its young. His wrath momentarily increased, and his high-colored face grew redder.

"It's outrageous ter treat a member o' the Assembly so!" he declared.

"Never mind; we sha'n't be any the worse for it."

"Tell ye what I'm goin' ter do."

"What?"

"I won't stay shut up here like a Christmas turkey. Mother an' Sally always tol' me, an' beseeched me, ter keep out o' contentions an' quarrels; but there is a limit ter human endurance, an' they'd be ashamed ov me ef I sot down here like a singed cat. Boy, I'm goin' ter smash that door!"

Mr. Berry raised the table and glared fiercely at the impediment to escape.

"What good would it do us?"

"What good?"

"Yes. It would take a good many blows, and before you could beat down the door, you'd have all the men just outside, waiting for you; then they would tie us both up tight, and the last chance of escape would be gone."

Jonathan put down the table.

"You've got your usual hoss-sense," he admitted. "You an' me couldn't lick all them chaps, but ef we lay quiet until night, we may be able ter git away, somehow—I don't jestly see how."

Wide-Awake Bert started out to relieve Mr. Berry's mind, and after assuring him several times that there was no danger of his being imprisoned up to the time when the Assembly was to meet, the old gentleman calmed down. More than that, he finally decided to take it all as a joke. He had never been greatly given to literature, but in his younger days he had read some of the ancient novels in which old castles, gallant knights, beautiful maidens, ghosts, and the like, figured, and he saw such a resemblance to those scenes—though the beautiful maiden was lacking—that he sat down and began to tell stories without limit.

In this way considerable time passed—how much they had no means of knowing until one of their captors brought in a very good supper and, also, the information that the evening had worn on to the hour of nine.

He would not give them any further information, and went out at once, but he had cheered them measurably.

To be furnished with a good supper after the assertion of Eliphaz Griggs that they would have to subsist on water, and do without that for two days, was a great relief, and did not promise so badly for the future.

But gave the opinion that they would not be harmed, but merely be kept confined for awhile, but Mr. Berry did not intend to submit to that, even; he was determined to escape before morning.

The voices of the men were to be heard in songs and laughter, and as they might not go to sleep for some time, Jonathan decided that he and Bert ought to retire at once, sleep a few hours, and then, when their enemies were in dreamland, awaken refreshed and—escape.

Just how the latter part of the programme was to be carried out he did not explain, but the first part was adhered to—they lay down and, being thoroughly weary, soon fell asleep.

Another interval passed.

The Street Steerer had been sleeping peacefully, but there was a change in his condition. He began to dream, and his dreams were of the worst kind. He went through a series of exciting adventures, in which the disturbing elements were at times men, then beasts, and then reptiles, but always he had one and the same trouble—whatever his enemy, that enemy tried to strangle him.

He awoke in alarm; he realized that what had gone before had been only a dream; he gasped for the relief of pure air.

The relief did not come; he drew that into his lungs which choked him and set him to coughing.

He started up wildly.

The lamp still burned on the table, but the air was thick and hazy. The room was full of smoke, and to his hearing came a roaring, crackling sound, not easy to forget when one has once heard it.

Instantly a realization of the truth flashed upon the boy—the house was on fire!

Quickly he turned to his companion. Jonathan was still sleeping, but he was gasping for breath and seemed in pain. Bert seized and

shook him; he shouted in his ear, but Mr. Berry did not stir. Thoroughly dismayed, Bert rolled him over and proceeded to administer a series of blows which were not without effect.

Jonathan opened his eyes and stared around, but his gaze lacked the light of reason.

"Wake up!" the Street Steerer shouted. "Stir yourself! The house is on fire, and we shall die unless we git out. Wake up!"

Jonathan made an effort, and rose to his knees.

"Wh—wh—what?" he gasped, swaying like a drunken man, and still without intelligence.

Bert experienced fresh alarm. His aged companion was far gone. The smoke was thick upon his lungs, and his vitality was succumbing to the attack.

The necessity of fresh air was imperative, and Bert left him and rushed to the door. He pounded upon it, and shouted at the top of his voice, but the only answer came in the form of the crackling and roaring, which told that the fire was still progressing.

Jonathan appeared by Bert's side, staggering blindly.

"Let me out, won't ye?" asked the old man, pleadingly. "I feel sick!"

Bert's gaze encountered the table, and he remembered Mr. Berry's former idea of beating down the door. That was enough—Wide-Awake ran forward, seized that article of furniture, and proceeded to rain blow after blow upon the door. It shook, but the wood was hard and dry, and he made no encouraging progress. He felt a weakness, too, which not only prevented effectual action, but pointed to entire and speedy collapse.

Mr. Berry was fumbling aimlessly at the door.

"Won't you please ter let me out?" he gasped.

Bert began to despair. He tried to shout again, but only succeeded in making a husky whisper. Even to his own ears it was less distinct than the crackling of the flames.

CHAPTER XIV.

A GOOD MAN AT THE "RIBBONS."

BERT realized that he must rally at once and decisively. It seemed that they must depend upon their own efforts, and not much time was vouchsafed them. In a little while, unless they escaped, the old house would become their funeral pyre. Fortunately, he had the best idea he could have gained—if he could not beat down the door by the mere force of blows, it might possibly be done by using the table as a battering-ram.

He hurried to the further side of the room, held the stout table in what he thought the best position, and then rushed forward at full speed.

There was a crash as the collision occurred, and one panel was split into many pieces.

Back he went a second time, and again he charged forward. Splinters flew freely, and though he could not see distinctly, the condition of the door encouraged him to try the lock again. It had certainly been severely tried.

The result overjoyed him; the lock was broken; the door yielded and opened; the way to escape was presented. Smoke hung outside as thick as elsewhere, and the hall was lighted with a red glare, but no worse obstacle intervened.

Mr. Berry uttered a cry of joy, and when Bert seized his arm to help him forward, he made a great effort and did better than was to be expected.

Side by side they staggered through the hall.

As they did so they saw a man run through the smoke, and proof was thus gained that their enemies were astir, but no attention was given them. They reached the stairs. The worst part of their flight came then, for their strength was severely tried, and they lurched around blindly. A little while longer in the smoke would have wound up their careers forever, but their race was not run. The front door stood open, and they staggered through and reached the open air.

It was the happiest moment of Bert Barclay's life. Never before had the fresh air seemed so delicious. He drew it into his lungs in great gasps, and it appeared to soothe his irritated throat marvelously.

The vicinity was lighted by flames which were bursting out of the windows fiercely at one corner of the house, and the doom of the old building seemed to have been sounded. Only the efforts of a fire-brigade could have saved it.

"Lemme set down!" muttered Mr. Berry, huskily.

"Not yet; let us get away from the house."

"I'm weak—terrible weak!"

"Remember the other men."

"What men?"

Wide-Awake comprehended that his companion's mind was not yet clear, so he resorted to energetic action. Taking a firmer hold upon Jonathan's arm he led him resolutely away, and as passive obedience was given they were soon fifty yards distant. There they reached a well and sight of the old-fashioned pump partially aroused Mr. Berry.

"Jest like the one at home!" he ejaculated. "Land sakes! how often I've got water fur mother an' Sally ter cook with. I must hev a drink!"

Bert did not object, and both sampled the water.

The Street Steerer was beginning to feel a good deal like himself, and he willingly paused to watch the progress of the fire. It was gaining strength every moment, and the result could not be doubted. The men were not likely to perish. Some had already emerged from the house, and everything indicated due activity on their part.

The assemblyman's voice arose musingly.

"I do admire good well-water," he asserted. "I've got one on my farm that's hard ter beat, though Zaccheus Tibbs is ginerally regarded as layin' out the hull lot at Green Hills. My father owned my farm ahead on me, an' he had an old-fashioned sweep an' bucket ter the well. Many a time when I's a boy I hev—"

"Mr. Berry," interrupted Bert, "we must get away from here!"

"Eh? What?"

"Brace up, sir! Don't you remember the danger we have escaped from? Remember how we were imprisoned in the old house! Remember Eliphaz Griggs! Remember the fire in which we nearly perished!"

Mr. Berry started up.

"By Cain! I had forgot it!" he admitted. "I guess my head ain't so clear as it might be. Yes, yes; I remember. Let's git away at once!"

He cast off his stupor and appeared very much like himself. Bert was delighted.

"We can run away," he observed, "but I have another idea. Beyond question our horse and carriage are in the stable. Shall we leave them for our enemies, or make a try to get them?"

"Shall we? Wal, I should say so! That brown mare is wu'th ev'ry cent o' two hund'ud dollars, an' we ain't goin' ter let them scamps hev her—not by a tarnation sight! Come on! We'll get away with our property while t'other chaps are lookin' on ter see the fire burn."

He spoke with his old energy, and Bert was a willing ally to the idea. They made a slight detour, to avoid being observed by their enemies, and rapidly approached the stable. One glance was enough to satisfy them that the coast was clear, and they went to the door. This proved to be locked, but a crowbar close at hand was used with such effect that the way was soon open.

They entered the stable.

"There's the mare, an' there's the carriage!" Jonathan exclaimed, his face lighting up with pleasure.

"We want to get them together as soon as man can do the job!"

Mr. Berry realized this, and he acted accordingly. He had been harnessing horses for fifty years, and zeal now so overcame age that he amazed Bert with his celerity. He flung on the harness; he made several wild dives at divers straps and buckles; and Brown Nell soon stood equipped for service. It took but little more time to attach her to the carriage, and then Jonathan gathered up the lines.

"Now we're off!" he cried.

But Bert had gone to the door to reconnoiter, and he turned around with dismay pictured on his face.

"One of the men is coming!" he exclaimed.

"That's 'tarnal bad luck!"

"He must not be allowed to stop us."

"Stop us! Wal, I should say not! By Cain! I'll fix him! You stand back out o' sight."

A warlike fire blazed in the old gentleman's eyes, and he caught up a small piece of board and took position just to one side of the open door. Bert caught the idea and made haste to get back out of sight; then he awaited the result in a state of nervous expectancy.

The man's footsteps sounded outside, and presently he made his appearance. He entered without suspicion, but stopped short at sight of the brown mare in the carriage. That was just where he was wanted. Down came the board with all the force of Jonathan's arms, and the blow brought the intruder to the floor. He lay still and senseless.

"Quick!" directed the assemblyman; "git that rope that hangs on the peg. He ain't hurt no great, an' we want ter tie him up afore he sets ter hollerin'."

The order was obeyed with celerity, and the man's ankles and wrists were soon securely bound.

"Now let's get away!" suggested Wide-Awake Bert, anxiously.

"Lift this critter inter the wagon!"

"What! shall we take him?"

"You bet, we will. I ain't gone through all this ter be cheated out o' the fun o' sendin' at least one critter ter jail. The perleece ain't o' much use, but 'tain't Green Hills fashion ter let rascals go free. There! that'll do!"

The prisoner had been lifted into the carriage, and Jonathan and Bert quickly ascended to the same place. The eminent assemblyman grasped the reins and the whip.

"Git up, mare!" he added.

Out of the stable they went. The regular drive-way was around by the front of the house, but Mr. Berry had no intention of going that way. The way was smooth and open at the rear, and he started Brown Nell into a trot and went away briskly.

The fire was making good progress, and no one could live within the doomed house after that. The flames were lapping the roof on every side, bursting fiercely from the windows, and holding high carnival in the raging pit of fire within.

"I ain't seen the like," Jonathan asserted, "sence Deacon Ebenezer Sniffen's barn was burnt two year ago last December. I worked like a beaver, then, an' singed all my whiskers off on one side!"

This thrilling recollection stirred up the good old man for a moment, but as they circled around the house, there was something visible which brought him back to the present time. They saw Eliphaz Griggs and the other men in front of the house, and—the men saw them!

A shout went up from the group, in which anger and alarm were mingled, and then they turned and rushed toward the runaways in a body.

The latter heard Eliphaz's voice in a hoarse command, and the words, "Stop them!" were very distinct, but Mr. Berry sent back a derisive shout.

"Come on, ye 'tarnal critters!" he cried. "I'll bet a fifty-cent piece you can't ketch up—I do, by Cain!"

And he brought his whip sharply down on the mare's back.

CHAPTER XV.

JONATHAN HAS A RUDE EXPERIENCE.

BROWN NELL made a long jump, steadied herself—was off like a flash, her ears laid back viciously and her slender legs flying like clock-work. Jonathan grew exultant, but the mood was not shared by their enemies. They came running after the fugitives at full speed, and angry and threatening shouts went even faster.

"Hold up, there, or we'll shoot you!" one of the party cried, but Mr. Berry laughed tauntingly.

"I'll meet ye in Albany!" he answered, in a clear voice.

"Shoot them, men!"

The command appeared to be given in earnest but it was not obeyed. Perhaps the men were not armed—in any case, they did not fire.

Jonathan skillfully guided Brown Nell into the road, and from that time there was no longer any doubt. The mare kept up her clean, rapid gait, without a skip or stumble to mar it, and the pursuers gradually fell behind. In a short time the fugitives had the road to themselves; the other men were swallowed up in the darkness; and only the fiercely-blazing fire in the rear broke the peaceful aspect of the scene.

"That mare is a treasure!" affirmed Mr. Berry, as he reined her in somewhat.

"She has done nobly."

"I'll buy her when I git back ter Albany ef it takes half my salary. I guess the owner will ask about a hundr'd dollars fur her, an' I'll give it."

The Street Steerer remembered Mr. Berry's previous declaration that the brown mare was worth "every cent of two hundred dollars," but he did not refer to the fact.

"It does me a pile o' good," the old gentleman added, and his great good humor corroborated the statement, "ter have got the best o' that gang. They pounced on ter us, knocked us 'round, shut me up, nearly smothered us, an' talked as sassy as sixty, an' I didn't take it kindly—I didn't I vum! Wal, now, we seem ter hold the ribbons, now!"

"All looks lovely."

"Say, lad, who's it due ter? Great sakes alive! I ain't thought ter thank ye, yit. Why, ef 'tadn't been fur you, we should 'a' been smothered in that fire, an' smoked like bacon. Mother an' Sally wouldn't never seen me ag'in! Bert, I thank ye, hearty!"

Mr. Berry spoke with considerable emotion, and gave his big, brown hand to his young friend.

"You're a right brave boy, an' I'm proud ter know ye, an' be your friend!"

"I can say the same to you, sir. But see here, Mr. Berry, isn't our prisoner coming to his senses?"

"He is, sure's you live."

"It's about time, I should say."

"I hit him a pooty good wipe with that board, but I'll warrant no great harm was done him."

During the ride the man had been sitting unconscious on the bottom of the carriage, and between their knees, but he had begun to stir, and he now looked up at Berry.

"Wal, mister, how d'ye like it?" inquired the assemblyman, with sarcasm.

"What's happened?" was the inquiry.

"You've been took pris'ner, an' started fur jail."

"So it's you, is it? See here, let me go!"

"Do you reelly mean it?"

"Yes."

"When you see us lettin' you go, jest mention it."

The prisoner wrenched viciously at his bonds. "Beware how you fool with me!" he cried, fiercely.

"Gammon! You ain't in the right crowd ter bluff anybody. The long an' short on't is, you are our captyve, an' on yer way ter Albany. We shall hand ye over ter the constable."

"Men, don't be hard on me!"

The prisoner spoke pathetically. He had discovered that he could not break his bonds, and, realizing that he had been separated from all his friends, was trying the only resort left open to him.

"We won't," Jonathan agreed.

"I'll pay you well to let me go."

"Lemme see! Ain't you the man who was goin' ter git my check cashed at the bank?"

"He is, Mr. Berry!" Bert interrupted.

"Jes' so; I thought it. Mister, take my answer. I never yit was guilty o' lettin' a rascal go free, or compoundin' a felony, or barrin' the way o' justice; an' ef I should do it now, mother an' Sally would feel so tarnation ashamed on me, I shouldn't dare ter go back ter Green Hills. As fur you, you tried ter swindle me, an' I'll lodge ye in jail jest as sure as we both live! I wouldn't give a pint o' rye bran fur the constable of Albany, but I thank goodness that Green Hills has sent a man down here ter protect that pritty village from scamps!"

Jonathan smote his knee smartly with his big hand as he finished this stirring address, and it was clear that he was as impregnable to corruption as the Rock of Gibraltar to the puny force of the waves.

The prisoner was disheartened, but so much depended upon his efforts that he did not abandon them. Summoning all his eloquence, he made an earnest appeal, presenting his case in all possible lights, but he talked in vain. Jonathan was immovable.

During this interval, Wide-Awake Bert had not been forgetful of the fact that another team was in possession of their enemies, and as Brown Nell had been allowed to relapse into a moderate pace, he was not surprised when another horse and carriage became visible in the rear.

He called Jonathan's attention to the fact.

"Drivin' like time, ain't they?" the assemblyman answered.

"We are pursued."

"Looks like it, I vum. Wal, we ain't ketched yit. Git up, mare! What in tarnation be you doin'? Show yer speed, old gal, an' git out o' here like p'ison!"

He used the whip as he spoke, and Brown Nell stretched out her shapely legs, and responded with a tremendous burst of speed. Mr. Berry enthusiastically declared that she was "a good 'un," and so she was; but the pursuer was not so easily shaken off. Good horse-flesh was there, too, and the liveliest race ever seen, perhaps, on that road then took place. The landscape appeared to flash past in a dizzy area, and the wheels spun in a bewildering way.

Once the pursuers shouted several times, but their words were undistinguishable. They were some distance in the rear, and they never drew any nearer.

Gradually the speed and endurance of the

noble brown mare had effect; they drew away perceptibly; and when the broad road to Albany was reached, the pursuers gave up the chase and disappeared.

Once more Brown Nell was allowed to take an easy gait, and they went on toward the city in good humor—all except the prisoner. That he was downcast and demoralized, need scarcely be stated.

The night was fast wearing away, and when they reached Albany few persons were to be seen on the streets. Mr. Berry intended to drive at once to the station, where he had already become known, and deliver his prisoner to the "constable" in person, and he felt that it would be a proud moment in his life when he could show that Green Hills had beaten Albany out in the race.

Nothing occurred to mar his triumph.

He paused in front of the station in due time and found the police captain just leaving, but he paused gladly enough when he heard the news.

The prisoner was conveyed inside and put under examination, but, like a wise man, he closed his lips and refused to say a word in regard to his case. He was questioned until it became plain that he would say nothing, and then locked up.

The police had not been idle during the day. They had learned what tomb had been robbed, and something about Cap Gordon, but had no trace of the robbers. The captain complimented Mr. Berry; the latter was proud and delighted, and betrayed the fact in his looks and manner; the captain was amused and complimented him some more; and in a short time honest Jonathan felt as though he was soaring high in air, upborne by the grand things he had achieved.

Pride goeth before a fall.

When the visit was over Mr. Berry and the Street Steerer left the station, Brown Nell had been left in front of the place, but had wandered along fifty yards. They found her there, and the assemblyman was just gathering up the reins when a solid-looking man, who had been walking slowly toward them, paused and laid his hand on Jonathan's shoulder.

"You are my prisoner!" he sternly announced.

Mr. Berry's jaw fell.

"Hey?" he cried.

"You are arrested!"

"What in time do you mean?"

"I told you plainly. You are arrested."

"Land sakes! what for?"

"You will learn in due time, and I guess it won't puzzle you very much to surmise. I suspect you are an old crook."

"A what?"

"A crook."

"Mister, you shall pay fur that!" hotly declared the assemblyman. "I'm gittin' old, an' may not be as straight as I was once, but there ain't enough crook ter my backbone so but I kin thrash the man who—"

"Gammon! Come along to the station. I presume they will know you there, and I, myself, suspect that you are Wicked Jim, the pick-pocket!"

"Great land!"

Mr. Berry groaned, rather than spoke, the words, for the charge literally appalled him. Bert tried to say that there was a mistake, but their captor would not hear him. He marched them both into the station just as the captain was again trying to get away.

"Ho! Cap!" cried the stranger, "I'm glad you're here. I've got one of the biggest knaves who ever held up an honest man. He is Wicked Jim, *alias* Sneak-thief Ben, *alias* Gambler Sam—at least, so I think. Do you recognize the scamp?"

He gave the dumfounded assemblyman a rude shake, and that poor man was wholly unable to speak.

"There is something familiar about his face," the captain gravely admitted.

"Oh! he's the man I said. Look at him! Did you ever see a more knavish-looking wretch in your life?"

"Has he been up to any new mischief?"

"Stole a horse and carriage. The complaint was entered to me two or three hours ago, and I have been on the track. Wicked Jim had the audacity to venture near here, and I nabbed him. Cap, there is a cool five hundred offered for his capture, and I guess the boodle is mine!"

The captain burst into a loud, ringing laugh.

"You've made the biggest catch of your life, but whom do you think you have? Not Wicked Jim, but one of the honorable members of our Assembly. Mr. Detective, this is Jonathan Berry, of Green Hills; a very worthy gentle-

man, who, by the way, has just himself delivered a prisoner to me."

It was the detective's turn to look dumfounded, while Mr. Berry audibly observed:

"The stupidity o' some folks is amazin'!"

"I vouch for you," the captain added.

"Then I've made a fool of myself," exclaimed the detective.

"You have!" Jonathan agreed.

"Sir, I beg your pardon. I was directed to look for the brown mare, which I knew by sight, and her owner declared that she had been stolen; so when I saw you—"

"Don't mention it," interrupted Mr. Berry, his good humor fully restored. "The blame all b'longs ter the man that owns the boss, an', by Cain! I'll thrash him like all git out when I see him again."

"Bear in mind, Mr. Berry," urged Wide-Awake Bert, "that he expected us home before dark; that it is now nearly morning; and that he had already had one rough experience from letting Brown Nell—"

"That's a fack, young man; that's a fack. Nobody is ter blame, an' I won't lick nobody. Gentlemen, I'd ask ye all out ter take somethin' wet, but I b'long ter the temprance society, an' Parson Jenkins would hev me over the coals ef I did it."

It was unanimously agreed that Mr. Berry was excusable under the circumstances, and after a few minutes' friendly conversation, he and Bert made another start, entered the carriage behind Brown Nell and drove to her home.

They found her owner in an irate mood, but an explanation satisfied even him.

Half an hour later both our friends were in bed and sleeping the sleep of the just.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SECRET OF THE CLOSET.

WIDE-AWAKE BERT slept late—very late—the following morning. He might have kept it up some time longer had it not been for an interruption. When he did awaken some one was pounding on his chamber door, and he recognized the statement that some gentlemen were below who wished to see him.

He dressed as soon as possible and went down.

Mr. Berry was there, and with him was an intelligent-looking, keen-eyed man, not known to the Street Steerer.

"Bert, this ere gentleman is Mr. Chelmsford Dane," Mr. Berry announced.

"Glad to meet you, young man," observed Mr. Dane, promptly. "Are you interested in works of art?"

"In works of art, sir?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hardly know."

"Look at these pictures, and see if you ever met the originals anywhere."

The speaker extended two cabinet photographs, and they proved to be those of two young men. Naturally, Bert's suspicions were at once aroused, and he sought to find the subjects of the pictures among the gang with whom he had lately dealt. One look was enough to show that they did not represent the prisoner taken the previous night, or his confederate in the scheme to swindle Mr. Berry out of the check, but one of the photographs soon became of interest to him.

He laid the second down and studied the first, while Dane and Berry exchanged significant glances.

"I've seen this man!" the Runner suddenly declared.

"Where?"

"At the old house, yesterday."

"Was it the chap with the red necktie?" asked Mr. Berry, eagerly.

"That's just who it was."

"Good!" answered Dane. "Now for the other."

"Don't recognize it, sir."

"Just what I tol' him," commented the assemblyman, in delight.

"Very good!" added Dane. "I find my suspicions confirmed, and regret more than ever that those men escaped. The police captain promptly sent men to arrest them, but it was too late. The old house was found a heap of coals and ruins, and Eliphaz Griggs and the other men were gone."

"Mr. Dane, I'd like to know what all this means," Bert announced.

"You shall. We owe a good deal to you, and as you are represented as a discreet youth, I do not hesitate to speak freely. We think Cap Gordon was murdered!"

"Murdered!"

"Exactly."

"By whom?"

"His loving nephews, whose pictures you see before you."

"Is it possible?" Bert exclaimed. "But why should they have done that?"

"The love of money is the root of all evil," Mr. Dane quoted. "I am a lawyer, representing an insurance company in which Cap Gordon held a policy for a large amount. It was made payable to these nephews, and his death meant a good round sum to them. Gordon was a good-natured vagabond, and long since ceased to have enough money to pay the dues on his policy, but the nephews paid for him. The man was in good health, and liable to live twenty years. I infer that the nephews became impatient and put him out of the world by means of murder, Gordon's old housekeeper being their ally in the plot!"

The Street Steerer was silent for a moment, but the force of the revelation gradually died away, and new ideas entered his mind.

"But, sir, if that was so, why should they steal his body from the tomb?"

"I am not yet prepared to say."

"Would they not thereby work against themselves?"

"Not necessarily. If Gordon was poisoned, it would be well to get rid of the body, and, consequently, of ugly evidence against them; and it would be easy to start the theory that it was stolen by medical students, or others."

"Do I understand you to infer that it was his nephews who first had the body, who carried it behind Brown Nell, and lost it when it was tipped out of the wagon?"

"Yes."

"Then who were the men who at once stole it from the first stealers?"

"One of them was the would-be cheek swindler, whom you and Mr. Berry lodged at the police station last night."

"Yes; but what was *their* object?"

"I don't know yet."

"But, sir, both parties were together at the old house yesterday, and in a very friendly mood. How do you account for that?"

"I can't tell you; I don't know."

"It seems to me that we are not at the bottom of the mystery yet."

"There may be some points not yet known, but you can rest assured that the foundation of the plot is a scheme to get the insurance money; that the nephews planned and executed it; and that Cap Gordon was murdered."

"Where does Eliphaz Griggs come in? He was the admitted leader at the old house."

"He is some professional sharper whose experience has fitted him for the work. Possibly it was he who first suggested the idea of murder to the nephews, and when they began work, they gave him general charge."

"He hated Cap Gordon like tarnation," Mr. Berry observed, shaking his head.

"All these things will be made clear in time. The police are on the track, and the guilty parties stand but little show to escape. The insurance will never be paid on Gordon's body."

The lawyer arose as he spoke.

"I will go now," he added. "I thank you both for your valuable aid, and you will soon have a chance to appear against the criminals in court. Good-day!"

He took his departure.

"But," said Mr. Berry, solemnly, "this is a wicked, wicked world!"

"Some parts of it are, sir."

"Parson Jenkins was right when he said: 'The evil-man goeth abroad like a devourin' wolf, and the good man is his mutton!' The parson was right. Wide-Awake, you ought ter hear that man preach! His sarmons drown'd the women in tears, an' are so te'chin' that he's worked on the feelin's o' the sisters until they ain't good fur much, anyhow. Wal, what ye goin' ter do, to-day?"

"I hardly know."

"As fur me, I'm goin' ter write a letter ter mother an' Sally, an' show up the wickedness o' Albany, plain an' clear. Arter that ef—ahem!—Mrs. Cleopatra Clyde ain't engaged, I think I'll talk with her."

"A good occupation."

"Ain't it? By Cain! that woman pleases me! She's got a way I like, an' it does a feller good jest ter look at her. I wish she'd let me call her Cleo—I do, I vum!"

"Don't forget 'mother an' Sally,' sir!"

"Forget them? Not a bit on't! Nothin' but death could make me; but Parson Jenkins will call in frequent ter see 'em, so why shouldn't I talk with Cleo? They may hev the parson; I'd rather hev Mrs. Clyde—I had, by sixty!"

The eminent assemblyman spoke with great

enthusiasm, and Bert assured him that he showed good taste. Conversation continued for a short time longer, and then they separated. The old gentleman went to write his letter, while Bert first had breakfast and then went out to see if he could get any jobs at his regular business.

It was not long before he had a call, and was sent away by a merchant to deliver a small parcel. He was returning when he had a new and striking experience.

He was passing through a street when he noticed in front of one house a little old man who, being a cripple, leaned upon two crutches as he stood by the door.

Perhaps the boy would not have noticed him particularly had he not observed that the man was regarding him closely. As it was, he had gone a few paces past when the stranger spoke.

"Say, ain't you the errand-boy they call Wide-Awake Bert?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so; I've seen you before. Saw your name in the paper this morning, too."

"Did you?"

"Yes. Queer case about that coffin!"

"Yes."

"Have they found out all about it?"

"I think not."

"I ain't sure but I could help 'em!"

The Runner looked more attentively at the little old man.

"If you can do so, it will be a very good thing to do."

"I was just thinking of going to the police, but my legs ain't of much use, and I halted to trust any outsider; but when I saw you, it occurred to me you were just the person I wanted, you being already in the case."

"Anyhow, I shall be glad to help, if you have news."

"Come with me for a second."

The man took the key from his pocket. The building back of him was used as a dwelling-house, with the exception of a store on the first floor. Just then no business was done there, and the curtains were down. The man unlocked the door and they entered.

The long room was unfurnished, barren and dusty, a stove at one side being the only object to break the empty area. The outside door was closed and locked, and then the old man hobbled across the room to a closet.

"This ain't Bluebeard's closet," he observed, with a faint smile, "but it has its secrets just the same, and they are almost on the same plan. I own this house, and the store I let some days ago to two men. They said they were in the real-estate business, and wanted an office in this section. You shall see what they do business with!"

So saying he used another key; the door was pulled open; the interior of the closet was revealed; and Bert, looking curiously, found himself within three feet of a coffin!

CHAPTER XVII.

BERT HAS AN IDEA.

The Street Steerer started back in surprise. "Don't be alarmed; the concern is without an occupant," the man said, quietly.

He turned the box partly around, and Bert saw that it was vacant. In some places, however, bits of earth were clinging to it, and the boy felt sure that it had done service.

"What do you think of that?" the cripple asked.

"In mercy's name, what coffin is this?"

"I've told you how I let my room," was the reply. "Well, I expected the real-estate business to be booming here before now, but my tenants are conspicuous only by their absence. One day at breakfast my little girl told me she had seen my so-called real estate men drive up here early in the morning and carry a coffin into this room. I laughed when she said it, thinking she had mistaken the character of whatever box she saw them have. I did not know then about the coffin case; I only knew about it when I saw this morning's paper. When I read that, however, I remembered my girl's story, and set out to investigate. I had a second key to the outside door, but not to the closet. I came in, found the closet locked and the key gone, and my curiosity increased. I hunted up all the keys I had, found one which would fit the door, opened it and—this is what I found!"

He waved his hand toward the coffin.

"Are you sure your girl saw this brought in the same morning the coffin was tipped out in the street?"

"I'm certain."

"But where is the—the body?"

"They've taken it away."

Bert was silent. He felt that there was a mystery still unexplained.

Suddenly the boy started. An idea had flashed upon him with startling force.

What if Cap Gordon was not dead?

The Runner turned eagerly to the cripple.

"I'm going to the police-station!"

"Do it, as soon as you please. Bring them here and let's have this settled. Tell them—"

The old man stopped short: Bert had shot out of the door like a flash, and there was nobody to hear further words.

Straight to his friend, the police captain, went the Runner, and his haste and excited air led more than one person to notice him and leap to the conclusion that he was going to summon a doctor. Reaching the station, Bert rushed up to the captain.

"S-s-say!" he panted, "have you a description of Cap Gordon?"

"Certainly."

"Give it to me!"

"He was sixty years old; of medium size; once intelligent looking and never a vagabond in appearance; had abundant gray hair and bushy beard; deep-set eyes under bushy brows; face a trifle seamed from dissipation; a mole on his left cheek and fingers deformed by rheumatism—"

"Captain," Bert interrupted, "I've got news for you!"

"Have you a clew to where the body is?"

"The 'body' is more than that, it is a living man. Cap Gordon is alive!"

"Impossible!" was the officer's exclamation.

"It's true. He's alive, and I've seen him. Cap Gordon is none other than Eliphaz Griggs!"

The captain stood in dumfounded silence.

"Didn't I ask you where Griggs came into the game?" demanded Wide-Awake Bert.

"But you said he spoke harshly of Cap Gordon; that he actually abused the man."

"So he did, but I see through it now. He must have been a grim joker, and *this* was the biggest of all his jokes. Why in the world didn't we see through it? He said he and Gordon were boys together; that he was a favorite with Gordon's mother; that Gordon ate *his* fruit, played with *his* toys, and slept in *his* bed; that he paid Gordon's fine when Gordon was arrested after a carouse; and that Gordon had often worn *his* clothes and spent his money. Of course that was all true if he was Gordon, himself, and I must say the old man got a big joke on us."

The captain brought his hand down upon the desk forcibly.

"There may be something in what you say. It occurs to me now that cunning Cap Gordon may have been in the scheme to get his insurance money; that his nephews and the old woman joined in the plot to defraud the company; and that Gordon was merely feigning death, or was drugged, when put in his coffin. Take me to see the coffin at once!"

Selecting two officers to accompany him, the captain, guided by Bert, made his way with all possible dispatch toward the store. They had nearly reached it when they met the owner hobbling rapidly along on his crutches.

"Say, the real estate men have come back!" he exclaimed.

"Come back?"

"Yes. They are in the store, now."

"Ha! we'll nab them. Hurry up, boys!"

In a few moments the party had taken position in front of the door. The curtains shut out all view, but the captain took the owner's key and, using it rapidly, flung open the door and entered.

An interesting scene was revealed.

The stove door was open, revealing a pile of fine fuel within, and a man stood, hatchet in hand, over the coffin, which had been brought out into the room. Obviously, it was the intention to split up the box and burn it, but interruption had come just in time.

Near the fellow with the hatchet stood a second man, and both were promptly recognized by Bert as having been among those he had seen at the old house with Eliphaz Griggs.

"They're the ones!" the Runner exclaimed.

The captain stepped forward.

"Men, you are my prisoners!" he uttered.

The strangers showed signs of alarm and dismay, but he with the hatchet tried to brave it out.

"What joke is this?" he demanded, defiantly.

"There is no joke about it, as you will find to your cost. I arrest you for stealing Cap Gordon's body! Men, put the irons on them!"

The captain spoke sternly, and his assistants moved forward. No resistance was made, al-

though the prisoners seemed tempted to fight it out, and in a short time they were ironed. An effort to make them confess proved of no use; they denied any and all knowledge of Gordon.

But little time was wasted upon them. An examination of the coffin was made, and it was found to be a novel and very ingenious affair. The usual mode had been greatly varied from, and ample space left, in a secret way, for air to find its way to the interior.

All this confirmed the Street Steerer's idea, and the captain became a firm believer in the theory that Cap Gordon was alive.

Within half an hour both the prisoners and the box were conveyed to the station, and Bert received a hearty compliment from the captain.

The officers started in to make fresh efforts to run down the slippery Cap Gordon, while Wide-Awake Bert hastened to Jonathan to reveal the latest developments. The gentleman from Green Hills was just finishing his letter to "mother and Sally," and he was amazed by the news.

"The wickedness of Albany beats all natur'!" he declared, holding up both hands in horror.

"I vum! I'll hev a bill in the Assembly ter put a stop ter sech goin's-on afore a week passes. Reform is needed here, an' I'm the man fur the job. So Eliphaz Griggs was reelly Cap Gordon! The way that feller bamboozled us makes me blush—it does, by Cain! Wait a bit, Bert, an' let me write the latest news ter mother an' Sally. There is room in this letter, an' I may as wal put it inter this dockyment as ter waste another postage-stamp. Land sakes! how knocked endways mother an' Sally will be when they hear what we've gone through."

Mr. Berry's own eyes beamed with excitement and pride, and he turned to make the additional record.

And what were the last acts in the drama?

All of the rascals connected with the plot were captured—all except Cap Gordon. That person was not found. It was believed that he escaped to Canada, but he left no trail, and he is still a free man.

The plot was one to defraud the insurance company. Cap Gordon planned it; his nephews and Hannah Baker were the confederates. The crafty old man feigned death, and had no trouble in the coffin, for, besides the air that came in naturally, he had a sort of pump to force in more if needed. The whole concern was of his own making.

After his allies took the box from the tomb they started to carry it to a house near the railroad station. Unfortunately, they had drank heavily of liquor; they quarreled after Rense Black was left behind; one deserted the other, who went on, after some delay, alone.

The second party in the work was made up of New York sharpers, who had discovered the plot, and determined to have a hand in it. They stole the coffin in the public street from Gordon's allies, took it to the store and opened it. Naturally, Gordon was forced to make terms, and he took the meddlers into partnership. They all went to the old house, and it was, indeed, Cap Gordon who masqueraded as Eliphaz Griggs.

Of course the latter lost the last chance of getting the insurance on his life, but in his new home, wherever it is, he is no doubt still congratulating himself on having escaped the meshes of the law. He has good reason, for all his confederates were given sentences to prison more or less severe.

Jonathan Berry served a full term as assemblyman, and did himself honor. He did not, however, introduce one of his pet bills in that body. He attempted to, several times, but on every occasion when he tried to rise and speak, he felt a remarkable weakness of the knees and kept his seat.

He tried to buy "Brown Nell," but failed. He offered seventy-five dollars, but when he learned that the price of the mare was three hundred and fifty dollars, he decided that he would not invest.

To the end of his term of office he continued to admire Mrs. Clyde, but his superior attachment to "mother and Sally" never wavered, and in the end he gladly went back to Green Hills to surprise and awe those good women, and his neighbors, with stories of his marvelous adventures in Albany.

And what of Wide-Awake Bert?

We beg your pardon, but the *sobriquet* no longer applies to him. Herbert H. Barclay, Attorney-at-Law, is the gentleman who was once the Street Steerer. He is still "wide-awake," and is winning deserved renown in his profession. Merit and honor will tell when one tries to conquer the world.

THE END.

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